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Curiosity and its role in cross-cultural knowledge creation

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This paper explores the role of curiosity in promoting cross-cultural knowledge creation and competence development. It is based on a study with four international higher educational institutions, all of which offer management and business education for local and international students. The reality of multicultural and intercultural relationships is researched using constructivist grounded theory method, with data collected through in-depth interviews, long-term observation and participation, and discussion of the social reality as it was experienced by the participants. The study applies the concepts of cultural knowledge development, cross-cultural competence and cultural distance. Based on the comparative analysis, curiosity emerged as a personal condition conducive to the cultural knowledge development process. The paper presents a cross-cultural competence development process model, which takes into account the cultural curiosity of the learners. The paper also provides tentative recommendations for the steps that knowledge-creating multicultural organizations can take to develop cross-cultural exchange, cultural knowledge creation and cross-cultural competence development.

Keywords: curiosity, knowledge creation, cross-cultural competence (CCC), competence development grounded theory

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Introduction

The impact of curiosity on intrinsic motivation, exploratory behavior and social engagement has recently received attention in career development and learning literature (e.g., Inkson & Myers, 2003). However, specific aspects of curiosity, such as curiosity in various social environments, social networks and shared knowledge creation, have not received the level of attention they deserve,

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although it has been long recognized that curiosity has a beneficial influence on the development of international careers, global mindset and knowledge creation (e.g., Curry, 2015; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002; Harvey, Novicevic & Breland, 2009; Holopainen & Björkman, 2005; Levy, Beechler, Taylor, & Boyacigiller, 2007; Mahroum, 1999). This paper addresses a specific aspect of curiosity, cultural curiosity, and its influence on cross-cultural competence and knowledge creation in multicultural social and learning networks.

Curiosity can be understood as "a recognition, pursuit and intense desire to explore novel, challenging and uncertain events" (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009, p. 368). It is regarded as a personality trait, similar to the 'openness' trait, which is related to personal characteristics such as imagination, a preference for variety, and intellectual curiosity (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Curiosity or inquisitiveness has been cited as a crucial element of intercultural effectiveness (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Deardorff, 2006) and multicultural effectiveness (Hassanzadeh, Silong, Asmuni, & Wahat, 2015; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). A generally positive attitude toward a new culture has been found to positively influence intercultural competence, communication and global mentoring (Curru 2015; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). It has been suggested that curiosity is "fuel for increasing…global savvy, enhancing…ability to understand and maintain integrity, and dealing with uncertainty" (Gregersen, Morrisson & Black, 1998, p. 23). Bennett (2009) states that curiosity is essential to the ability to keep a learner's mind open to multiple perspectives; and Harvey and colleagues (Harvey et al., 2009) posit that curiosity is instrumental in dual-career couples' global career orientation. In addition, addressing the role of curiosity in the learning process, it has been suggested that "curiosity driven process of individual learning, mediated by mindfulness (i.e. ability to focus on one's curiosity) can lead to the creation of different types of knowledge" (Leonard & Harvey, 2007, p. 295), including tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1967). Schneider and Barsoux (1997) suggest that such factors as the desire to live and work in a country different from one's birth or permanent residence, openness to others and involvement in a novel culture (Kealey, 1996), and having a positive attitude toward a new culture (Lonner & Hayes, 2004) have been found to stimulate cross-cultural competence development.

Although it is established that curiosity is a positive factor in CCC development, there is limited understanding of what locations are likely to incite curiosity and what location and cultural characteristics are likely to be conductive to development of cultural knowledge. In addition, while several recent studies examine motivation to move abroad and engage in international careers (e.g., Doherty, Dickmann & Mills, 2011; Andresen, Biemann & Pattie, 2015) there is a lack of research that focuses on country and culture attractiveness and on the factors that influence decisions to move to a specific location and engage in a specific cultural learning. Therefore, a better understanding of

what influences the development of cultural curiosity would be likely to improve cross-cultural exchange, cultural knowledge creation and cross-cultural competence development.

Methodology

This study was grounded in the participants' experiences and preferences and it endeavored to understand the role of cultural curiosity from the participants' point of view. Rather than asking a question of 'what made you move here?' it took a forward looking perspective and addressed the following questions: 'what would make you move/or stay abroad?' and 'what do you find desirable in a given environment and why?' Even though it can be argued that a retrospective review provides more realistic reasons for the participants' actions, it could also be noted that a person might wish to create a coherent career narrative to justify opportunistic or serendipitous actions by supplying conventionally appropriate motives for them (Bosley, Arnold & Cohen, 2009). A discussion of current attitudes towards the place of residence and learning environments provided a start for development of theoretical themes grounded in rich data.

A constructivist grounded theory constant comparative analysis was conducted within four undergraduate management and business administration programs at international higher educational institutions (IHEIs) (Charmaz, 2006). The study was grounded in rich data that was collected from triangulated multiple sources: qualitative semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document reviews. A total of 79 students from four programs were interviewed. In addition twelve faculty members and four administrators were interviewed to provide background information and additional data on the learning environments and academic process. The summary of the individual participants' personal data is presented in Table I. The student participants in the researched programs were on average older than traditional university students. Almost all had prior experience living, studying and working in a culture different from the culture of their origin. Therefore, in contrast to traditional university students, the study participants were representative of professional businesspeople rather than the young adult population.

Academic and social events were observed to provide the settings for the discussions, and institutional documents were reviewed to illustrate the organizational rhetoric and procedures. In keeping with the grounded theory method (GTM), all the data was coded repeatedly and simultaneously with the data collection process at three, increasingly abstract, levels (initial, focused and theoretical), to allow for constant comparison analysis among all the new and existing data, and for inductive theory building until theoretical themes emerged. During the analysis process, the focus was on the cultural learning process, attempting to answer the question 'what is involved here?' At the next stage, based on "the most significant and frequent codes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57), analytical categories were generated to facilitate theoretical development.

Table I. Summary of the Interview Participants' Personal Data

School / Participants	Male/Female	Students/ Instructors/ Administrators	Students: Local/ Exchange & International	Students' Countries of Origins
Finland, University of Applied Science	4/18	21/0/1	7/14	Finland, Estonia, Germany, Russia, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, Latvia, Lithuania
Czech Republic/ UK partner	4/5	8/0/1	1/8	Czech Republic, Nigeria, Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Macedonia, France
Czech Republic/ US partner	19/12	25/4/2	10/15	Czech Republic, Germany, Sweden, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Cyprus, Serbia, Israel, Vietnam, Finland, Ukraine
Ecuador/ International program	16/16	24/8/0	16/8	Ecuador, Columbia, Russia, US, Germany, Canada, Chile, Mexico

In the GTM, data are privileged and so no defined research questions or hypotheses were presented at the beginning of the research process. The general objective of the study was to understand why and how individuals become involved in cultural learning and thus develop cross-cultural competence. This paper addresses specifically the role of cultural curiosity in this knowledge creation process.

Findings

Throughout the analysis, curiosity has consistently emerged as a salient personal condition conducive to the cultural knowledge development process. It has been a prominent theoretical category in the analysis in all locations where all student participants expressed an explicit desire to develop cultural competence in general, as a result of either their studies or their overall experience in the country. They also expressed curiosity in the culture and cultural learning at a specific location.

As no other personality characteristic or trait emerged as a salient condition, and curiosity can be either a personality trait or a motivational state (Langevin, 1971), it is reasonable to adopt a

traditional view on curiosity as the motivation for explanatory behavior (Berlyne, 1960; Dewey, 1913).

However, the comparative analysis uncovered considerable differences in the levels of interest generated by different national and academic cultures. The participants expressed a greater desire to obtain knowledge concerning those national, business and academic cultures that they considered to be interesting, fun or of future practical value. Therefore, knowledge of and about these cultures was considered more valuable than knowledge of and about other cultures. The future attraction of a country as a place of employment or residence also played a role in the degree of cultural curiosity, as *reflected in 'Future Professional Benefits'* focused code. Nevertheless, in general, the participants took a pragmatic view of costs and benefits – while it might be interesting to learn about some cultures, if it was not useful, it was not desirable. In particular, in all four locations the participants expressed a desire to learn about the US national and business culture. This interest was supported by such initial codes as 'valuing the US-type of educational practices', 'enjoying the US-type of team work', 'enjoy socializing with 'American' instructors' and 'wanting to know more about the US business practices' that were present in all locations. In general a country's higher economic development as well as perceived economic potential increased the attractiveness of cultures - the 'WEIRD' (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010) and the BRIC countries were most often named as desirable locations to work and to live after graduation.

The other factor that influenced the participants' attitudes towards gaining knowledge about a particular culture was '*Cultural Distance'* (Kogut & Singh, 1988) or a participant's perception of it (Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006). Cultures that shared similar political, religious and historical roots, and that were geographically proximate were considered culturally close (small distance) – for example Ecuador, Peru and Colombia, or the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine, and Nordic and Baltic countries, specifically those that share historical roots, such as Sweden, Finland and Estonia.

The participants considered those countries from which they had no acquaintances or friends, and of which they had limited knowledge of history, art, politics and social economic situation to be culturally distant. Such countries were often at a large geographical distance from a participant's country of origin. They were often perceived as a region, not a distinct country – African countries, the Former Soviet Union (FSU), the Arab countries, or Central America. This was reflected in the initial codes of 'Not wanting to learn about the FSU' and 'Not interested in African countries' The countries participants perceived as either culturally close or distant were considered less attractive and interesting than those that were perceived as having a middle cultural distance.

In addition, the entertainment, or 'fun' value of a culture generated attraction and cultural curiosity, as expressed in the in-vivo focused code of '*Cool Culture'*. The cultures that were regarded or experienced as 'serious' and 'sober' (expressed in an initial code 'finding culture

prohibiting /strict') appear to be less attractive than those that were supposed to be more social, festive, affectionate, and relaxed ('perceiving culture as fun'). The 'fun' cultures also appeared to be easier to approach and become engaged with and knowledgeable about, while more 'serious' and less affectionate cultures appeared to be inaccessible and even forbidding, exercising severe penalties for not following the implicit rules of social and business interaction. Those students who had been exposed to the 'fun' side of social interactions through humor, literature, videos and personal experiences were more likely to find the culture attractive. The initial codes of 'interested in literature/media/art' and 'interested in the social life of the location' were illustrated by the students' discussion of finding a 'softer' and 'funnier' side to national cultures through art, participation in local festivals and social events.

However, in contrast to non-local residents and exchange students, the international student participants rarely expressed cultural curiosity regarding the local host culture, believing themselves to be experts in it (as illustrated by such initial codes as, for example, 'knowing a lot about Latin cultures' or 'not interested in learning anything more about Finnish culture'); yet a decision to remain in the country was often motivated by what the participants perceived as an irrational, affective factor. This is consistent with the findings of Tan and colleagues (Tan, Hartel, Panipucci & Strybosch, 2005) concerning the effect of emotions in expatriate experiences, reflected in a focused code of '*Affection*'. However, the participants' perception did not correspond to Affective cultural dimensions as proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2002). Some of the cultures high on the Affective dimension were considered 'boring' and 'punitive', while Japan, which corresponds to the Neutral dimension (ibid), was considered 'cool' and entertaining. The factors that influence cultural curiosity are presented in Figure 1.

Driven by the individual conditions of cultural curiosity and motivation to engage in knowledge creation, an individual learner participated in the existing social networks or developed new ones. This participation happened through engagement in local social and professional activities, enlarging the social network, making new connections and enriching ties with the existing ones. Prudent decisions to trust new acquaintances (connections) and the ability to inspire trust in them contributed to an individual's existing social capital and allowed the person to participate in more networks and access less open networks, thus creating and sharing cultural knowledge and individual cross-cultural competence.

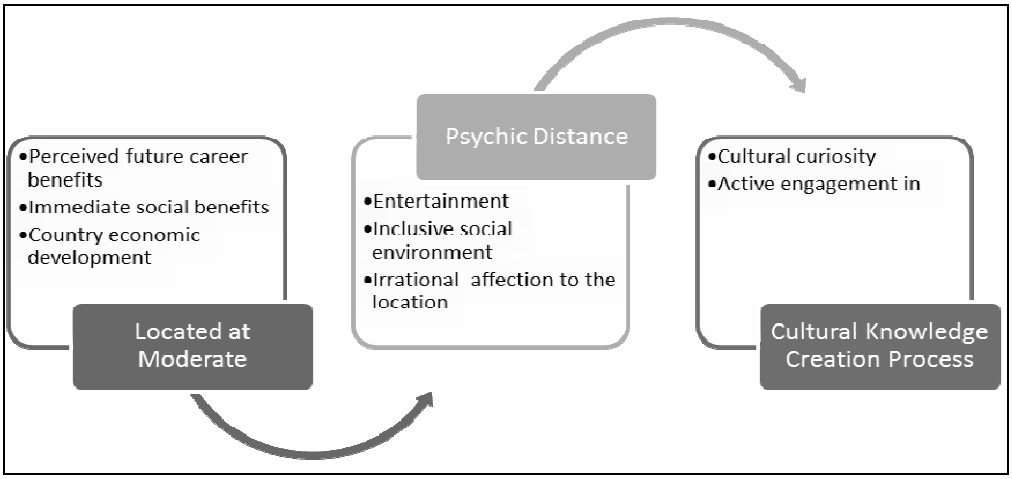

Figure 1: Cultural Curiosity

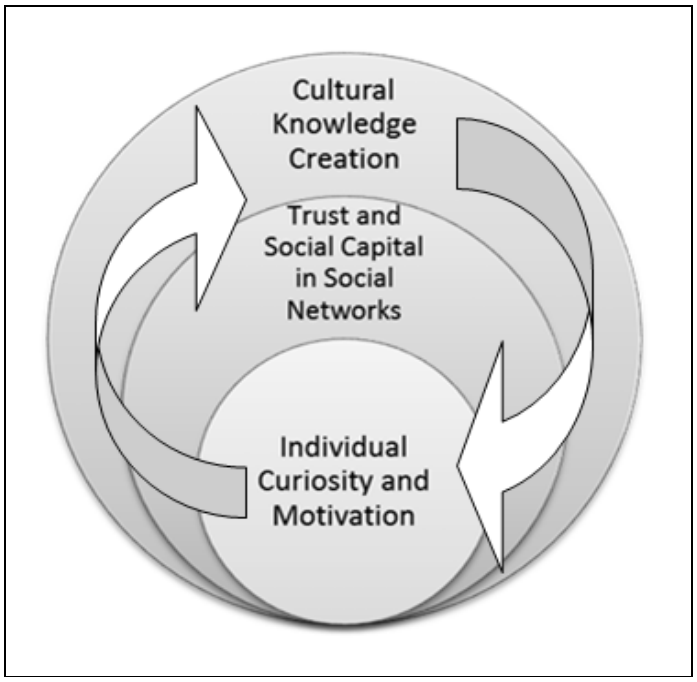

Figure 2: Cultural Knowledge Creation Process

The greater the extent to which a person, driven by cultural curiosity, participated in the cultural knowledge sharing and creation process, the more his/her individual curiosity and motivation increased, and in turn, social capital and the ability to develop trust and to make decisions to trust were likely to increase as well, which in turn enabled him/her to engage in more or exclusive networks (Mikhaylov & Fierro, 2015). Therefore, it was a continuous, long-term cultural learning and cross-cultural competence development process

To summarize, the intrinsic motivation to engage in cultural knowledge creation and sharing has emerged through the data analysis. The participants were likely to be motivated to engage in this process when they considered it both practical and enjoyable, when they expected both immediate benefits such as an improved ability to communicate with peers and engage with local community and more distant ones – successful global career and international entrepreneurship. The process was influenced by cultural curiosity, and it appears that the participants were more likely to engage in cultural knowledge and cross-cultural competence development if they had positive affective associations with the location and cultural practices.

The most obvious step toward cultural knowledge creation is seeking information and culturally sensitive recommendations for appropriate actions from other members of one's networks. For example, the participants reported asking their friends, both local and international, for advice on how to address conflicts in school. The participants recognized that, even if no new information was added, simply verifying and comparing the existing information can be useful, as one of the uses of network connections is validation and problem reformulation (Cross, Borgatti & Parker, 2001).

International faculty members were commonly regarded as a source of information, advice and mentorship, particularly by local students who had international career plans and, therefore, valued not only professional expertise but also social connections. Certain participants held that the social and cultural knowledge took precedent over the purely academic knowledge of the business disciplines.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants expressed the greatest curiosity and desire to get deeply involved in cultural environments that were different from their own, had pragmatic value as a possible future place of employment, study or a source of customers and/or business partners, and were perceived as fun and exciting places to live. These findings are consistent with other studies that confirm that global cosmopolitans are likely to choose to live in different countries motivated by curiosity (e.g. Brimm, 2010). It appears that cultural curiosity is not affected as much by cultural distance (Kogut & Singh, 1988) but by *psychic* distance (Sousa & Bradley, 2006), or cultural distance combined with the individual's personal interests or preferences. The term 'psychic distance' was originally used in the discussion of cultural knowledge acquisition (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; 1990), which can be adversely influenced by a negative experience or perceived image. The study participants also expressed curiosity regarding the cultures that were attractive to them in practical or entertaining senses. The most desirable were cultures located at a medium cultural distance, offering the best career and business prospects and fun/entertainment factors. Therefore, the students' curiosity about a particular culture was influenced by their perception of cultural distance (Drogendijk & Slangen,

2006), or 'cultural toughness' and 'cultural novelty' (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), as well as 'cultural-emotional connectedness' (Volet & Ang, 1998), or the perceived 'coolness' or excitement value of a location. Participants considered the national cultures at a moderate cultural/psychic distance to be the most attractive, both as a future residence and a place of employment/ business, and as a location where they would like to develop social and business contacts.

Futhermore, cultural curiosity influences individual motivation, including the affective and 'fun' angles that pique cultural curiosity and increase the desire to engage further with the culture in question. Motivation is vital to the exchange and combination of learning, or what Quinn and colleagues (1996) call creativity 'care-why'. Learners are more likely to be engaged and perform well in a task when they perceive it as challenging, but engaging, as curiosity tend to initiate a process which involves flow-like engagement and the integration of novel experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). However, such a task should not be perceived as being beyond learners' skills and abilities (Bandura, 1994). This is consistent with the participants considering the national cultures to which they assigned a moderate cultural/psychic distance to be the most attractive, both as a location to which they would like to move after graduation and from which they would like to have more social contacts, friends, peers and mentors. The student participants who expressed a general interest in other cultures and novel environments were also more likely to express a desire to learn more about a specific culture, based on their cultural curiosity, and to live in a specific country for a period of time. This is consistent with Goldstein and Kim's (2006) findings that students with higher levels of ethnorelativism were more likely to study abroad and participate in exchange programs. As curiosity is at the core of the intrinsically motivated action (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009) the curious individuals tend to pursue actions for the intrinsic rewards and thus curiosity is instrumental in the development of knowledge and competence, including cross-cultural ones.

Blasco and colleagues (2012) caution that the motivation for cultural learning vary significantly depending on the context and goal. In a business environment, the motivation to transform one's individual identity is more likely to be influenced by 'instrumental' or pragmatic motives, with the aim of achieving personal goals, rather than 'impressionistic' or 'normative' ones. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) insist that "intrinsic rewards [such as] a deeper sense of the value of participation to the community and the learner lies in *becoming* part of the community" and the development of identity can also motivate learning, even in business and professional environments (p. 122). The student participants, while not always addressing their motivation to engage in cultural learning, agreed that participating in a learning community and becoming a member of it generates, in addition to the intrinsic value of becoming a member, tangible extrinsic rewards in the form of future (and, in some cases, current) career, financial and social benefits. Therefore, in this case, the differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors

appears to be impractical. The motivation to engage in a cultural knowledge creation process among student participants is influenced by their, potentially situational, interest or curiosity, as well as by educational and career goals (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Students' interest in global careers depends on their perceptions of the professional advantages associated with such goals (Wang & Bu, 2004), and while in the academic environment, students regard cultural knowledge in pragmatic terms of academic or social benefits and accomplishments, they are likely to develop cross-cultural competence and a global mindset following social experience with other cultures and worldviews (Marcotte, Desroches & Poupart, 2007).

Implications for Future Research and for Practitioners

There are several implications for further research emerging from this study. It would be beneficial to establish whether cultural curiosity can be considered a prerequisite for CCC development, or its result. In addition, it would be useful to find out what educational and social activities might trigger cultural curiosity, both general and environment specific. One of the possible research goals might be inquiring whether cultural curiosity is dissentingly separate from a general curiosity, and if so, what factors are likely to trigger its development.

However, even at this point, practitioners can be advised that learning and training projects, and activities with significant social and emotional involvement, are likely to stimulate the cultural curiosity of learners, as well as to encourage exploratory behavior. In particular, it can be advisable to engage international and exchange students in local social activities that allow for a high degree of interaction among the learners and local residents. While specific suggestions depend on the location, it appears that local festivals, celebrations and holidays are conductive to development of cultural knowledge and exciting cultural curiosity. In contrast, adventure trips, fine art and historical sites visits seem to be of lesser value in terms of awakening curiosity and the desire to engage in a local culture as a participant.

In conclusion, it can be said that while it is not clear whether international students and young professionals would be likely to move to locations which culture they consider 'fun' and entertaining, or whether they find cultures that promise most future career benefits to be intriguing and 'cool', the entrainment and affective factors should not be underestimated, and should be addressed in international education and training for global professionals.

Limitation of the Study and Directions for Further Research

This study makes a contribution to existing knowledge on cultural curiosity and on the motivation to move to a specific location among international business and management future and current professionals. However, based on the specific characteristics of the study, certain limitations

could be noted. Due to the selected methodology, it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to whether cultural curiosity was present in the learners prior to their engagement in the cross-cultural competence (CCC) development process, or in academic education in general, or whether it was a result of such development. Nevertheless, cultural curiosity has been admitted and exhibited by the participants who also possessed higher CCC and who were actively engaged in a development process. In addition, as the selection of the settings and the individual participants to be interviewed was driven by theoretical emergent themes, there was no opportunity to return and discuss the themes with the original participants, as they would have left the programs. Therefore, the final models remain theoretical, as, while they are grounded in data, they have not been confirmed by the participants.

As an exploratory study, grounded in emergent data, this research has revealed a number of topics and issues that merit further investigation. Further empirical testing of the model can be achieved through detailed participant accounts that concentrate on the process of the development of social capital and trust in cultural knowledge sharing networks, motivated by cultural curiosity, either in an educational or professional setting. In addition, the choice of the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) permitted the collection and analysis of data on the participants' experiences as they were reported and made sense of by the participants, but such findings cannot be generalized to a large population, to all international students, or even to international business students at these four schools.

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