

PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this article is to review the literature of organizational learning from different perspectives. These perspective form four different conceptual streams: cognitive, cognitive-behavioural, social constructive, and social cognitive. Of the four perspectives, social cognitive perspective approaches organizational learning in a holistic way connecting cognition, social construction and behaviours. This perspective also explains the process by which organizational learning happens in an organization. Further, this study reveals that social cognitive perspective enriches the domain of organizational learning with substantial empirical contribution.

Keywords: *Organizational learning, cognitive-behavioural perspective, social-constructive perspective, social-cognitive perspective.*

Introduction:

The concept of organizational learning is more than 50 years old and it first emerged as an insight for making management decisions in enterprises (March & Simon, 1958). Organizations which aspire to have competitive edge in this global context have to learn faster than their competitors. The best way of doing this is to make their employees learn and share their learning with others and thereby making their learning beneficial to themselves and others. When human potential leaves the organizations, in order to retain their learning it should be memorized in the form of procedures, rules and routines to derive benefit out of their learning. Thus organizational learning is defined as a process involved in transfer of learning from individual level to that of organization. In organizations, organizational learning is the medium for exploiting past experiences, espousing environmental changes and enabling future options (Berends, Boersma, & Weggeman, 2003).

Fiol & Lyles (1985) observe that the broad acceptance of organizational learning is not matched by any systematic convergence of the concepts: 'No theory or model of organizational learning is widely accepted. Each researcher approaches the subject from different perspectives, leading to more divergence' (p.803). What is organizational learning? In the literature, researchers approach this question with different perspectives. Review of literature reveals that researchers approach organizational learning through

the process perspective which is fundamental in nature. The process perspective deals with what is organizational learning and how it happens. In its initial stages, literature of organizational learning witnessed the debate on process of learning. Two perspectives dominated this debate, cognitive and cognitive-behavioural perspective. In recent years, academics study learning in social – constructive and social- cognitive perspectives and profess that learning is situation- specific practice (Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000). In this paper, we discuss the contribution of each perspective to the growth of organizational learning literature.

Cognitive Perspective:

The treatment of learning as a cognitive or cognitive - behavioural has been widely debated in the literature. Researchers embracing purely cognitive perspective conceptualise organizational learning as the growth of new insights through the review of assumptions, causal maps or interpretive schemas (Huber, 1991; Kim, 1993; Friedlander, 1983). Viewing from this perspective, organizational learning is explained by changes in cognition of individuals in organizations and is characterised by human information processing which involves acquiring, forming, storing, manipulating, discarding, and implementing information (Akgun, Lynn, & Byrne, 2003). Huber (1991) differentiates learning and action by suggesting that an organization has learned 'if any of its units

acquires knowledge that it recognizes as potentially useful to the organization' (p.89). Here, learning is conceptualised as the acquisition of new insights whereby learners build up new cognitive maps or belief systems. From the individual-cognitive perspective, learning happens in organizations through continuous changes of both the composition and schematic relationships of the elements within the key individuals' cognitive structures (Hayes & Allinson, 1994). Fiol and Lyles (1985) differentiate cognitive change and behavioural change by signifying that cognitive change is learning and behavioural change is adaptation. Sometimes behavioural change may not follow the cognitive change (Friedlander, 1983). Behavioural change without an accompanying cognitive change and cognitive change without a corresponding behavioural change are intermediary states and they create a tension between one's beliefs and one's actions. When individuals experience cognitive change without any behavioural change, it is characterised as anticipatory learning (Inkpen & Crossan, 1995).

Some authors extend this perspective to organizations. Viewing from this perspective, Hedberg (1981) proposes 'Organizations do not have brains, but they have cognitive systems and memories. As individuals develop their personalities, personal habits, and beliefs over time, organizations develop their views and ideologies' (p.6). But, capacity and learning styles of individuals and those of organizations are different. Same cognitive lens that is applicable to individual learning cannot be applied to organizations (Cook & Yanow, 1993). Individual orientation emphasized by this perspective is less useful in understanding organizational learning behaviours because of anthropomorphism (Jones, 1995). Careful analysis of literature reveals that researchers embracing this perspective propose various theoretical models and this perspective lacks empirical research.

Cognitive – Behavioural Perspective:

The other school of thought which takes cognitive – behavioural approach, conceptualise learning as 'insights guide behaviours' or 'behaviours lead to new insights' (Argyris, 1977; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Garvin, 2003; Cangelosi & Dill, 1965). In this perspective, learning is characterized as an individual human process of consuming and storing new concepts and skills/behaviours, frequently in terms of translating learning to capabilities that add to organizational resources. Argyris (1977) suggests by holding a behavioural view: 'An organization may be said to learn to the extent that it identifies and corrects errors' (p. 113). Stata (1984) defines learning as 'the process by which individuals gain new knowledge and insights and thereby modify their behaviours and actions' (p. 64) Individuals on behalf of organizations learn and change their cognitive thoughts which

results in action influencing individual and organizational behaviours (Simon, 1991).

Behavioural change which arises from forced learning will not last long because individuals interpret their environment with their existing beliefs instead of their new beliefs. But in the case of experiential learning, behavioural change is accompanied by cognitive change thereby creating new beliefs and results in integrated learning (Inkpen & Crossan, 1995). Emphasising cognitive – behavioural perspective, March & Olsen (1975) propose in their experiential learning cycle that individual belief causes action which forms the basis for organizational action and affects environment and in turn environment alters individual beliefs. Argyris (1999) holds that individuals as agents of organizations generate the behaviours that lead to learning. In their theory of action, Argyris & Schon (1978) posit that collective individual theories of action are connecting links between individual learning and organizational learning. Daft & Weick (1984) differentiates learning with interpretation by the concept of action and propose that interpretation involves cognitive change and learning involves behavioural change. Levitt & March (1988) view 'Organizational learning as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour' (p.319). Learning outcomes are embedded in the organization's systems, structures and culture (Snyder & Cummings, 1998). Some researchers extend this perspective to study team learning. Applying cognitive – behavioural perspective, team learning is conceptualized as a 'ongoing process of reflection and action, and characterized by asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on the results and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes of actions' (Edmondson, 1999, p. 351). Fiol & Lyles (1985) in their review, considering organizations as a unit of analysis, propose that learning constitutes of various proportions of cognitive and behavioural developments. Further they conclude that firms in mature industries operating in stable environments have low levels of cognitive or behavioural changes. 'Learning comprises the process of acquiring knowledge through experience, which leads to a change in behavior. 'It is not the acquisition of knowledge, but the application of knowledge through doing things differently in the world' (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997, p. 107). Kim (1993) extends individual learning model to that of organization. In his model, learning is split into two levels: conceptual (know why) and operational learning (know how). Operational learning deals with acquisition of new skills which involves physical ability to produce action. Conceptual learning deals with ability to articulate one's experience. Conceptual learning challenges existing frameworks and leads to build new frameworks. Individual learning is explained through

a cycle of processes which are Observe, Assess, Design and Implement (OADI). Assess and Design processes cater for conceptual learning whereas observe and implement processes produce operational learning. These individual learnings are translated into development of individual mental models and these produce organizational learning through their shared mental models. Challenging the current fundamental assumptions and testing of alternatives produce double loop learning which helps the individual to change one's mental models and thereby influencing shared mental models thus paving the way for double loop learning at organizational level.

In their integrated frame work, Lipshitz, Popper, & Friedman (2002), taking both cognitive and behavioural stances, define productive organizational learning as 'a conscious and systematic process which yields information and intends to produce results and new perceptions, goals and/or behavioural strategies' (p.82). Structural, cultural, psychological, policy and contextual facets are networked to produce productive organizational learning.

Using quantitative and qualitative approaches, Naot, Lipshitz, & Popper (2004) find support for the occurrence of double loop learning and classify it as high quality. They propose that outcomes, processes and contexts are important factors for deciding the quality of learning. In their study, this high quality learning is associated with changes in behaviour (outcome) caused by sharing of mental models (process) and supported by facilitative leadership which increases psychological safety of the members (context). Campbell & Armstrong (2013), in their study, taking mental models as a criterion, investigate the relationship between individual mental models and shared mental models representing individual learning and organizational learning respectively. When there is a change in internal and external business environment the mental models possessed by individuals get altered. Some of these changes drive individual action and thus become individual learning. These changed mental models which exhibited through dialogue and participation, are translated into coordinated action, when intersected by external and internal business environments. Viewing from this perspective, Ellis, Margalit, & Segev (2012) show that use of organizational learning mechanism increases the shared knowledge among organizational members through alteration of shared mental models.

Social Constructional Perspective:

This perspective advocates that learning is an integrated component of individual's everyday organizational life and work practice (Nicolini & Meznar, 1995) and is not restricted to taking place as individuals' knowledge acquisition (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998). This perspective views organizations as communities of meaning, and these

communities are shaped by individuals' power relations and emotions; and organizational learning as a means of increasing the ability of parts of organization to communicate with each other (Edmonstone, 2017). Viewing from this perspective, organizational learning is defined as construction of understanding out of social environment, physical environment and social relations of the people involved (Brown & Dugid, 1991). Organizational learning is continuous social activity undertaken among individuals in work settings (Brown & Duguid, 1991), differentiated from an individual cognitive process (Cook & Yanow, 1993). This view of organizational learning changes the learning process from taking place in the minds of individuals to being part of the participation patterns of the organizational members. Conditions in which learning takes place influence learning. Learners are acculturated and acquire the community's subjective view points and learn to speak its language. Learning takes place in relations between individuals or between the individual and her/his work task (Ortenblad, 2002). Cook & Yanow (1993) applying perspective of social constructivism contend that when individual know hows are collectively established in organizational activities, organizations are said to learn. They hold the view that learning always does not result in change in behaviour. They claim organizational learning does not produce observable change always, is not necessarily a product of external stimuli and its product 'organizational knowledge' is unique to each organization. From social – constructive view, individual learning is affected by learner's beliefs, emotions, feelings and attitudes as well as environment, culture, and climate in which learning takes place (Schurman, 1980). Viewing from this perspective, individual learning is based on individual needs, sometimes this individual learning is not aligned with the needs of the organization (Silgo, 1996).

Further, this perspective proposes that collective learning is nurtured through the ways through which community members build up collaborative work practices for interpreting events and solving practical problems. The cultivation and sharing of historically developed and socially accepted practices among members of organizations promote shared identity and facilitate relationships (Wenger, 1998). Learning also comprises the acquisition of a 'situated curriculum', which means making use of the learning possibilities that are open to the newcomer in his or her meeting with one or several communities of practice in an organization. Boreham & Morgan (2004), adopting a socio cultural view, in their qualitative research establish that dialogue among individuals promotes social order and learning and this learning translates into routines with mediating effect of culture.

Social – Cognitive Perspective:

Researchers embracing cognitive perspective, view organizational learning as aggregate process involving cognition of individual members. This view neglects behaviours associated with the cognition and also social interaction among members of organization. Researchers taking cognitive – behavioural perspective base their studies purely on information processing and resulting behaviours, thus ignoring the social perspective. Authors viewing organizational learning in social- constructive perspective give importance to social aspects of learning and ignore cognition. Social cognitive perspective integrates all these three perspectives and provides holistic view of organizational learning. If social cognition studies how cognition of individuals is influenced by interaction with other individuals and by organizational culture, norms and routines (Virkkunen & Kuuti, 2000), then it is possible to integrate social interaction and cognition into study of organizational learning (Allard-Poesi, 1998). According to this perspective, organizational learning is achieved by collection of people in social context and affects the learning and cognition of its members by its routines, norms and culture (Akgun, Lynn, & Byrne, 2003) . This approach is grounded in how people interpret and construct a social environment (Weiner, Graham, Taylor, & Meyer, 1983; Gioia & Sims, 1986). It studies the presence of social behaviour and mental processes while individuals interact (Martin & Clark, 1990). It is also about the social processes involved as a whole in acquisition of information, its storage, transmission and use, with the aim of creation of intellectual products (Larson & Christensen, 1993) .

Taking social cognitive approach, Crossan, Lane, & White (1999) in their 4i frame work split organizational learning in to four sub processes and three levels. The processes are intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing; levels introduced are individual, group and organizational level. Intuiting and interpreting happen at individual level; interpreting and integrating at group level; integrating & institutionalizing at organizational level. Intuiting is a process of pattern recognition, expert intuition is connected to exploitation and entrepreneurial intuition is connected to exploration. Interpreting is a social activity that creates and refines common language, clarifies images, and creates shared meaning and understanding. Through interpretation, individual's actions are altered. Integrating is the process by which shared understandings are put into collective action. (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999) The collective actions once tested, are embedded into organizational routines, rules and procedures through institutionalization. Exploitation of existing knowledge is through a feedback flow from institutionalization to intuition. Exploration of new knowledge is nurtured by a feed forward flow from

interpretation to integration. Thus the whole process is dynamic and there is a tension between exploitation and exploration. In their frame work, Crossan, Lane, & White (1999) state that team learning consists of feedback learning (exploitation-type) and feed-forward learning (exploration-type). Feedback learning begins with the institutionalized structure of the team and transfers to individual team members, who intuit and interpret the learning process within the team context. Feed-forward learning pertains to the process by which a team member's intuition and interpretation become institutionalized parts of team learning (Bucic, Robinson, & Ramburuth, 2010).

Berends & Lammers (2010) in their longitudinal research using 4i framework, establish that discontinuities in the micro processes associated with the organizational learning are caused by social and temporal (conception of time) structures. Bontis, Crossan, & Hulland (2002) in their study of knowledge stocks and flows based on Crossan's 4i framework, establish empirical evidence that organizational learning stocks has a positive influence on organizational performance and also misalignment between stocks and flows of knowledge has negative influence on performance. Applying Crossan etal's framework to small and medium enterprises. Matthews, MacCarthy, & Braziotis (2017) find that process improvement practices developed by individuals get translated into organizational level changes. Sometimes institutionalized learning may obstruct the progression of learning from individual to group to organizational levels, thus causes discontinuity in the processes (Ziestma, Winn, Branzei, & Verinsky, 2002).

Future Directions:

Research on 'organizational learning' has grown extensively in the recent years, because of diversity of fields such as strategic management, personal psychology & social sciences, it engages with. Till researchers offer various definitions on 'organizational learning'. Further analysis of literature reveals the lack of empirical studies in this domain. Out of aforementioned perspectives, social –cognitive perspective approaches organizational learning in a holistic way connecting cognition, social construction and behaviours. This perspective also explains the process by which organizational learning happens in organization.

Conclusion:

In the foregoing sections, the perspectives with which researchers approach organizational learning has been summarised. Identified perspectives are cognitive, cognitive - behavioural, social construction and socio-cognitive. Careful analysis reveals that, cognitive-behavioural and socio- cognitive perspectives

influence the researchers studying organizational learning. Looking at the time frame, in mid of 80's, social construction came into play and in nineties, social- cognitive perspective has emerged, with the 4i (intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalising) model proposed by Crossan et al in the forefront. Recently more research works embracing this perspective have been found in the literature.

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