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The final version has been published as:

Pudelko, M. (2006)

Universalism, Particularism and Singularism in Cross-National Management

International Studies of Management & Organization, 36, 4, 9-37.

UNIVERSALITIES, PARTICULARITIES AND SINGULARITIES IN CROSS-NATIONAL MANAGEMENT

by
Markus Pudelko

ABSTRACT

It can be argued that the main debate within cross-cultural or cross-national management research is between two opposite approaches labeled here as universalism and particularism. This theoretical debate is vital for scholars and managers alike as it is not only of conceptual relevance but also has practical consequences. The first question is whether there are “best practices” in management, which are of universal validity and which can be borrowed by companies of one country from companies of another country (universalism) or whether differences in particular cultures and other contextual factors make this impossible (particularism). The second question is whether MNCs should use universally standardized practices when doing business around the world (universalism) or whether they should adapt to each particular local context (particularism)? This article contributes to overcoming this dualism, not by declaring one position more valid than the other, but by integrating the opposing approaches in a way that allows scholars and managers alike to structure universal and particular contextual factors into one framework. The proposed model should ultimately assist in determining what makes a national economy competitive.

INTRODUCTION

The research area of cross-cultural or cross-national management is largely influenced if not dominated by one major controversy usually labeled convergence versus divergence (Kerr et al., 1960) or, with a slightly different meaning, culture-free versus culture-specific (Lammers and Hickson, 1979). As will be explained later in more detail, supporters of the convergence or culture-free approach take the view that management theories and practices possess universal validity and are largely independent of cultural or other contextual influences. It is posited that an evolutionary-style selection process consequently leads to convergence towards best management practices. By contrast, representatives of the divergence or culture-specific approach argue that management practices are strongly embedded in their particular cultural and institutional context and cannot, therefore, be transferred from one country to another. The start of this fundamental debate arguably precedes the establishment of cross-cultural management as a research area and is far from being resolved. This controversy has stimulated a large amount of research output, but it may be argued that any substantial advance in this research area is also blocked as long as this dichotomy is not overcome.

More recent contributions have consequently abandoned the strict dichotomy between convergence and divergence, making efforts to provide a more differentiated picture. Frenkel and Peetz (1998) describe an increasing trend towards convergence, set off by globalization, which however is mediated by national industrialization strategies, national culture and the role of the nation state. Katz and Darbishire (2000) notice an increasing divergence of employment practices within each country, co-existing with a growing convergence of several workplace practices in industrialized countries.

The present contribution follows the tradition of the latter publications as it seeks to overcome the strict opposition of both research streams. As will be seen, the approach taken here is not to declare either convergence or divergence as more valid or closer to the truth, but to develop a model that integrates both opposites into an integrative framework. As well as addressing what may be the most fundamental theoretical question in cross-cultural or cross-national management research, this article has also very practical implications for management. First, it tackles the question of to what extent learning from other national management systems is possible. Second, it addresses the dilemma that all multi-national companies (MNCs) face – namely, the standardization versus the localization of management practices. Third, the model presented here should assist in systematizing the various components of what will be labeled here a national competitiveness system. A clearer picture of these components should help determine its specific strengths and weaknesses and should ultimately offer the possibility of improving national competitiveness.

The article starts out with some definitions and observations about the research area in which this contribution is located – that is, cross-national management research. Subsequently, an overview of the key controversy within cross-national management will be presented. This will be followed by the development of a model which encompasses and integrates opposing analytical traditions.

CROSS-CULTURAL OR CROSS-NATIONAL RESEARCH

In research practice, the terms “cross-*cultural*” and “cross-*national* management research” are largely used synonymously although the term “cross-cultural” is far more commonly employed. The interchangeable and inexact use of these two similar yet different terms may spring from the vague concept of “culture”. Kroeber and Kluckhohn had compiled already in 1952 almost 170 different definitions of culture. It can be assumed that, since then, this number has multiplied.

It is suggested here that there are two different ways in which the term “cross-cultural management research” is generally deployed. First, cultures and their respective management systems are regarded as concepts *to be explained*. Consequently, it is about comparing the management system of culture A with the one of culture B. In this context, however, it must be noted that the comparison of management aspects rarely follows the vague borders of culturally homogeneous communities but more often the clear-cut territorial borders of political sovereign entities (Kelley and Worthley 1981; Adler et al. 1986). Therefore, a comparative study would be more likely to contrast, for example, Spanish management with Belgian management (an orientation along jurisdictional borders) rather than, say, Catalonian with Flanders management (an orientation along more culturally defined areas). From this perspective, the term "cross-*national* management research" appears to be more precise.

However, there is a second possibility of referring to the term "cross-cultural management research". In this context, culture is to be understood as the *explanatory* concept when describing differences among various management systems. Consequently, it is about explaining the particularities of the management practices of countries A and B by their respective cultures (e.g., Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars 1998; House et al. 2004). Many scholars argue, however, that the factor "culture" is too limited or vague to be an all-encompassing explanatory variable of cross-national management differences. Consequently, they include, either in addition or alternatively, country-specific institutional factors such as capital markets, industrial relations and corporate governance systems (e.g., Jackson and Schuler 1995; Sparrow and Hiltrop 1997; Whitley 2000). Others even reject the significance of cultural and institutional factors altogether and instead focus more on best practices which exist among different national management systems (e.g., Levitt 1983; Waters 1995; Hannerz 1996; Toynbee 2001). The term "cross-*national* management research" is thus the more encompassing term, as it is not limited to investigating culture as the only explanatory variable. I would argue that most contributions to so-called "cross-cultural management research" are in fact contributions to "cross-national management research". Furthermore, it is held here that a more exact and differentiated use of both terms matters as confusion about the terminology diffuses the focus of this research area – a criticism which will be revisited when discussing the opposing concepts of "convergence" and "divergence" and of "culture-free" and "culture-specific". As this article goes well beyond culture as an explanatory variable for describing a national business system, it should be regarded as part of cross-national management research.

UNIVERSALISM VERSUS PARTICULARISM

UNIVERSALISM

Those authors adhering to the universalism line of thought often refer in their argumentation to economics, technology and psychology. The classical approach of both economics and management studies assumes that economic and managerial thought which has proven to be "right" and "successful" is of universal validity and applicability. As a consequence, efficiency imperatives press economies (and, on the micro-level, companies) to adopt "best practices", irrespective of cultural or national context. Much economic development theory adheres to the concept of economic universalism, whereby developing countries are expected to catch-up to already developed countries by adopting not only their legal and regulatory infrastructure and certain macro-economic policies, but by emulating their forms of organizations and management as well. If this line of thought includes national specifics, they are treated as contingencies or market failures that constrain economically optimum outcomes (Biggart and Hamilton 1992; Child 2002).

Harbison and Myers (1959) and Kerr et al. (1960) stipulated that economic rationality dictates how professional management has to act. Authors who became famous for developing rational management systems claiming universal validity were Frederick Taylor (1911), Chester Barnard (1938), and Mouton and Blake (1970). The following ones are frequently cited as being among the so-called universally successful management concepts: transparency of goals, shareholder value maximization, accountable corporate governance, rational resource allocation, systematic selection and development of human resources, and objective performance appraisal and reward mechanisms (Child 2002). If more and more companies were to adopt those practices which previously have been established as successful, what is supposed to follow is the worldwide convergence of management practices, irrespective of culture or other societal influences. Hence, this line of thought is frequently referred to as the convergence or culture-free approach (e.g., Levitt 1983; Prentice 1990; Kidger 1991; Waters 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Toynbee 2001).

The "universal language of technology" (Hickson and Pugh 1995) can also be perceived as a key driver of cross-national convergence towards best managerial practices. Kerr et al. (1960) stated that "an oil-refinery is an oil-refinery is an oil-refinery" wherever in the world it is located. The worldwide diffusion of technology or the "technological imperative" drives according to Harbison and Myers (1959) a "logic of industrialization" which in turn is accompanied by an "internal logic of the development of organizations and management", leading ultimately to converging institutional frameworks and organizational solutions. Thus, technological determinists argue that the rational leadership of productive and social organizations inevitably generates universal principles, approaches and practices which are always and everywhere applicable and successful, independently of cultural or other context-dependent factors (Knights and Murray 1994; Child 2002). From this perspective, the manager is a "neutral technician" and management "comes to be equated with the application of a technique" (Roberts 1996). Technological development is thus regarded as the prime mover of economic advance. Production machinery as well as transportation, information and communication technologies are examples of technologies most spurring the global standardization and convergence trends.

In addition to economics and technology, the third research area providing important support for the universalism approach is psychology (Child 2002). Psychological universalists assume that all human beings share common needs and motivational structures. Examples of well known motivation theories which claim to have universal validity, independently of any cultural context, are Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs model, Herzberg's (1968) two-factor theory, McClelland's (1988) achievement motivation theory and Porter and Lawler's (1968) expectancy theory. The postulation of universal human needs has significantly informed the concept of utility which is at the basis of much of economic theory. There is an implicit expectation that worldwide economic growth stimulates social structures and personal lifestyles to develop (or converge) in a predictable direction, a trend that has accelerated under the impetus of late twentieth century globalization (Child 2002). The prediction is for a more uniform world.

In its most comprehensive version, the convergence approach suggests that entire societies are steadily moving towards each other technologically, economically, managerially, socially, politically and ultimately even culturally. The fall of the Berlin wall, the implosion of the Soviet Union and the widespread victory of democratic market economies over authoritarian or totalitarian centrally-planned economies has only reinforced this belief. In the political domain, the idea of convergence is best expressed by Fukuyama's (1989) frequently cited notion of the "End of History". With a significantly more skeptical overtone, the notion of "McDonaldization" of the world (Barber 1995), due to the marketization of societies and, more specifically, to exposure to the same marketing messages from MNCs is an evocative expression of this convergence trend. Management education often stresses the technical and the functional aspects of management, treating it as a culture-free activity of universal validity (Locke 1989; Roberts 1996). Alongside MNCs and business schools, consultancies also promote perceived best managerial practice. Martin and Beaumont (1988) assert there is a re-emergence of "one-best-wayism" in the literature, perhaps most influentially expressed in the "guru theories" (Huczynski 1993).

PARTICULARISM

The opposite of the convergence or culture-free approach is the so-called divergence or culture-specific approach. Whereas both opposing pairs are largely regarded as synonymous, convergence versus divergence indicates more the *direction* of historical processes, while culture-free versus culture-specific refers more to the *cause* of this (converging or diverging) process. The authors subsumed under the divergence or culture-specific school stress the embeddedness of national management methods in their cultural and institutional context. A country frequently referred to in order to support this argument is Japan. Its management model has often been described as equally if not more successful than the Western one, yet fundamentally different because of deep-rooted cultural or institutional differences (Abegglen 1959; Dore 1973; Vogel 1979; Ouchi 1981). Also within the West, fundamental differences have been identified, mainly between the United States and Europe (Guest 1990; Brewster and Bournois 1993; Brewster 1994, 1995) but also among European countries (Child and Kieser 1979; Maurice, Sorge and Warner 1980). Authors who stress the continuing differences among management practices due to basic contextual dissimilarities are more skeptical about the possibility of cross-national learning from best practice and they see little room for the cross-national convergence of management processes (e.g., Lammers and Hickson 1979; Laurent 1983; Adler 1983; Adler and Bartholomew 1992; Whitley 1994, 2000; Hickson and Pugh 1995, 2001).

The frequently employed term "divergence" in the literature cited above is in this specific context actually a rather inappropriate and misleading antonym of "convergence". To diverge literally means "to move apart". What most authors of the so-called "divergence" approach argue, however, is that national management models are different and will remain different due to persisting differences in cultural and other societal factors by which they are largely determined – without, however, going as far as to state that those management models actually move apart, that is, become over time even more different from one another. Therefore, "non-convergence" or "persisting differences" might be the more appropriate antonym to "convergence" here. Also "culture-specific" appears not to be an optimal generic term as many authors stress institutional variables next to or instead of cultural factors (Whitley 1994, 2000; Wilkinson 1996). "Culture-specific" seems therefore too narrow a term. Because of these difficulties, this article uses the opposing pair "(context-free) universalism" versus "(context-specific) particularism". The term "context" includes both cultural and institutional factors and the main focus is put on the question of whether management theories and practices have *universal* applicability or if they are limited in application to a *particular* country or region.

Studies focusing on cultural differences among countries constitute an important pillar of the particularist approach (Hofstede 1980; Laurent 1983; Hall and Hall 1990; Trompenaars 1998; House et al., 2004). According to those authors who stress the importance of culture, management theories and practices retain their own particular and distinct characteristics as they are embedded in their respective national culture which developed over a very long period of time. Economic utility, personal motivation and the ways in which information is interpreted are all seen to be culture-specific. This line of thought essentially goes back to Max Weber (1905) who established in what may be the most famous sociological text ever written, the connection between Protestant ethics and capitalism. The cultural perspective has for some time provided the dominant paradigm in comparative studies of organizations. Child (2002, p. 33) spoke of an "intuitive appeal" cultural concepts have to managers. In particular Hofstede's study (1980) continues despite all criticism to captivate scholars and practitioners alike.

In addition to those authors who focus on culture, there are those who emphasize variations in the institutional foundations of national business systems (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 1995). Institutionalists like culturalists tend to concentrate on national differences and consequently tend to be part of the particularist approach. They choose, however, different explanatory variables, by focusing on variations in institutional settings in order to account for existing and persisting cross-national differences in management practices. Typically, the political, legal, industrial relations, educational and financial systems and their influence on management are analyzed. The various forms these institutions take constitute the different national business systems (Whitley 1992). Whereas the delimitation of homogeneous cultures is often difficult, institutions (state, economy, company) and their sphere of operations are often easier to define. It is assumed that these institutions explain the ways in which management operates.

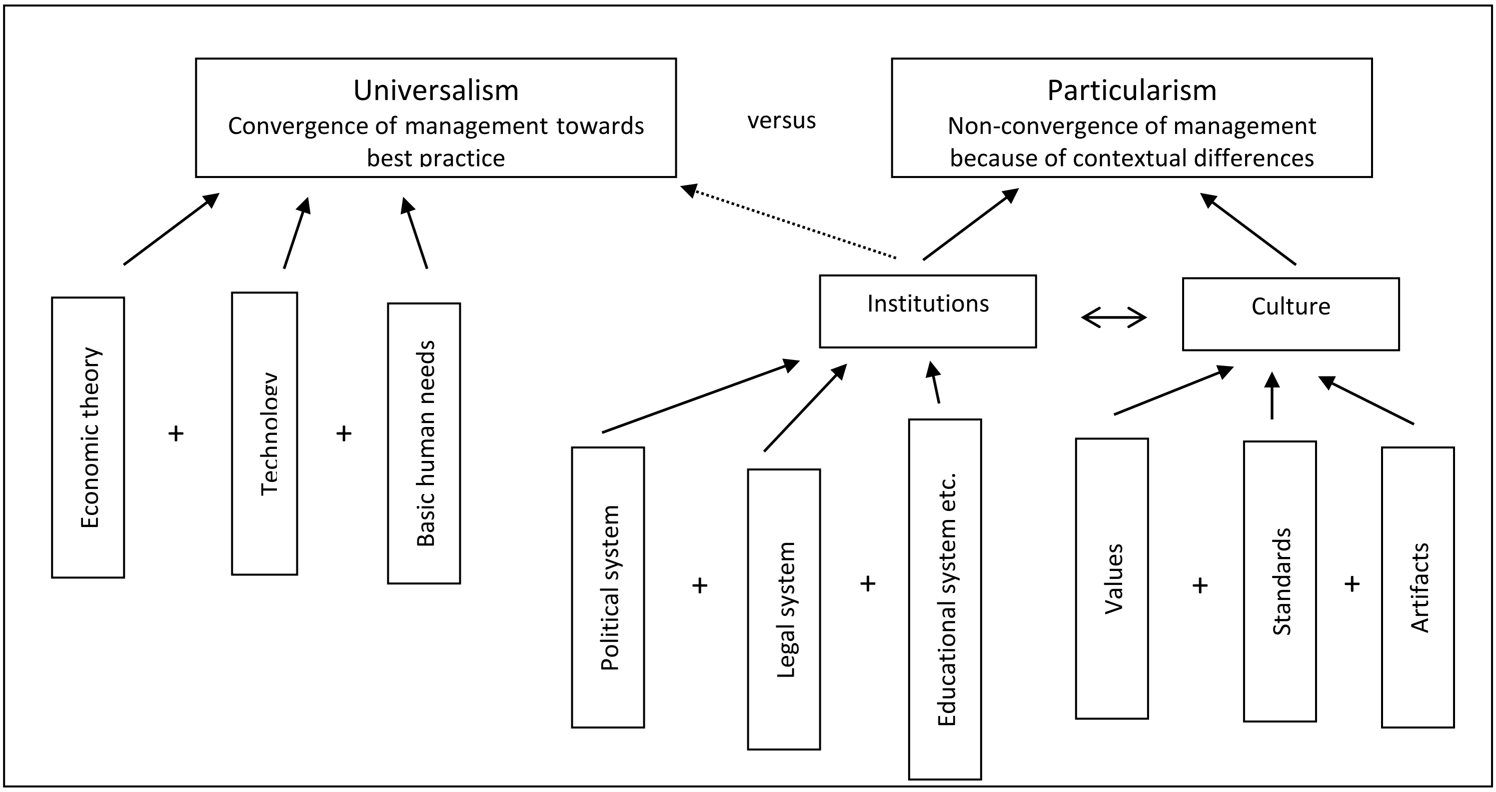
Institutional theory implies that nations have their own logic of social and economic organization and that those theories claiming universal validity may in fact betray their own specific institutional origins. Institutional theorists stress the historical embeddedness of social and organizational theories, structures and processes. This leads to a profound skepticism regarding convergence or, as Child (2002, p. 35) put it, "institutions are likely to be 'sticky' in the face of economic and technological change." Furthermore, institutionalists argue that economic survival and growth depend on specialization around national strengths which actually tends to preserve nationally distinctive patterns of management, even within a fully open and globalized competitive system. Consequently, while universalists stress the importance of economics, technology and psychology, particularists play down their explanatory force and focus instead on the importance of either culture or the state and its legal and regulatory infrastructure.

An intriguing consequence of institutionalism is noted by Smith and Meiskins (1995). According to these authors, institutional analysis increasingly treats some particularly successful or dominant national systems as "models" and hence removes them more and more from historical evolution, elevating them instead to standards against which to judge other societies. Examples of countries which have obtained model status are the United States, Japan, Germany and Sweden. Because of their specific set of institutional frameworks, they have been treated as "modern", providing "best practice" ideals from which other societies are encouraged to borrow and learn. By transposing national patterns of institutions into "models", institutional analysis reverts back to "one best way" and convergence theory.

Smith and Meiskins (1995) observed that North American scholars tend to be more receptive towards constructing systemic typologies of models which should be emulated (e.g., for Japan, Kenney and Florida 1993; for Germany, Wever 1995). European management research by contrast appears to be more reluctant to develop models which are detached from the specific national context where they originated and consequently evaluate the potential for adaptation to be more critical (e.g., Altmann et al. 1992).

What is now of interest for the universalism-particularism debate is that institutionalism – which started out supporting, as culturalism, the particularist argument – is letting through the formulation of "models" from which other countries can adopt best practices, a kind of universalism in again through the back door. Figure 1 summarizes the universalism-particularism duality and the sources both approaches are referring to as outlined in this section (the dotted line illustrates the last argument made).

Figure 1: Universalism vs. Particularism



CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM POSITIONS

UNIVERSALISM

It has already been pointed out that economic theories, technology and human needs are frequently referred to in order to support the convergence argument of the universalism approach. However, for all three areas, the validity of this line of reasoning can be questioned. One rather powerful objection to the universalistic assumption of convergence is the significant body of evidence indicating persisting cross-national differences in economic development at the macro level and in management practices at the micro level.

With regard to economic development, most of neo-classical economic theorists have been predicting for decades that underdeveloped countries will catch-up. While there is some evidence to support this argument (e.g., for those countries which shifted from centrally-planned to market economies), there is equally discouraging evidence (e.g., Africa). For the convergence of GDPs to occur, more than just emulating economic policies of the more successful economies appears necessary (North 1990; Landes 1998). Also, within economically advanced countries significant national organizational and managerial differences seem to persist. Apparently, the transfer of allegedly successful practices has not always been easy, smooth or effective. There are several reasons for these difficulties which range from resistance to change, to confusion about what the essential ingredients of economic success are, and to long incrementally developed gestation periods (Heller 2002). To explain the continuing differences among rich and poor, and even among rich nations only, additional factors appear to matter. This suggests the importance of institutional and cultural factors, as is stressed by institutional economists (Williamson 1985) and, within cross-cultural management, by supporters of the particularism approach.

Furthermore, the formulation of those allegedly universal economic theories depends to some degree on the cultural or institutional context from which they originate. This can be exemplified by the concept of interest rates. It appears to be universally accepted that interest rates are an economic necessity to incite people to save and pass their savings on to those who wish to invest. The reward they receive for renouncing current consumption is the interest rate. Apparently this is a logical and fully justified way of providing capital, without which an economy can hardly function. Yet, for centuries, the Christian Church prohibited the receipt of interest, which was thought of as usury. Today’s economists are quick to denounce the complete misconception the Church had of the vital importance and completely moral legitimacy of interest rates.

Yet, in the early Middle Ages, there were no such things as free access to capital markets or banks functioning as intermediaries between lenders and credit takers or market mechanisms which could have established a “fair” interest rate. In addition, credits were mostly sought not to invest, but to consume and, for most people, consumption meant pure survival. Under these circumstances, when a peasant asked after a bad harvest his lord for a loan (and he was often the only one the peasant could ask), he would have accepted any interest rate just to get through the next winter. Under these conditions, interest rates could quickly become usury so that the reaction of the Church was understandable.

Institutional settings have changed and so has the position of the Church towards interest rates. Islam, however, which in some ways tends to be less ready to adapt its rules to social change still today strictly forbids interest rates. Modern Islamic banks are therefore based since 1975 on the principle of *Mudarabha* or profit-and-loss sharing (PLS) which is essentially a mechanism to circumvent interest rates. This example illustrates that even the apparently most universally valid economic theories and concepts cannot be separated from the cultural and institutional contexts in which they are supposed to operate.

Also technology appears to be less universally identical in its application and deterministic in its social consequences than is frequently assumed. There is much empirical evidence regarding the considerable degree of freedom within which organizational arrangements are made up around the same technology. New technology often even allows for more flexibility and variability in its application (Child and Loveridge 1990; Child 2002). Furthermore, the shortening of product cycles and of product technology cycles signify that competitiveness does not only depend on the “right” application of existing technologies, but increasingly on the ability to invent and develop new technologies. And here again, cultural and institutional factors might explain why some countries are more successful in this pursuit than others. Future-orientation, optimism and a low degree of uncertainty avoidance are cultural factors which facilitate inventions. Institutional settings such as the protection of intellectual property rights or laws regulating biotechnology also set important parameters for the development of new technologies.

Finally, the suggested universality of human needs and motivation theories also requires qualification. Whereas motivational factors of a lower order might well be considered to be fairly universal (sufficient food, shelter, security), claiming the universality of higher-order needs such as esteem and self-actualization, which are of a more cognitive nature, is more problematic. Such needs are socially defined and therefore reflect what is culturally valued (Child 2002). Hofstede (1980) argued that even motivation theories, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model, reflect U.S. cultural values, in particular individualism, with their emphasis on achievement and self-actualization as the highest-level needs. In addition, the business sector is not only striving to fulfill human needs, but also to create them in the first place, for example, through marketing messages. On a more fundamental level, one might argue that the human needs of today’s secular, present-oriented and materialistic societies are quite different from those, say, in a Buddhist country like Bhutan or from those in Europe some centuries ago. In other words, human needs as well as economic theories and the application and development of technologies are far from being universal.

PARTICULARISM

Even though full-fledged universalism might be too simplistic a concept, the particularists’ cultural and institutional arguments also appear to be not fully convincing. Japan, in particular, was always referred to as a prime example to illustrate the point that a specific cultural and institutional context can lead to fundamentally different but equally successful management practices, compared to Western ones. However, the current economic malaise of Japan and the restructuring of its business system, for which the United States are often cited as a role model, are now used as counter-evidence, actually giving supporting testimony to the convergence of management practices argument.

Critics of the culturalist perspective deplore that, despite its intuitive appeal, culture is in many empirical studies only ex-post conceptualized and used as a residual variable (Redding 1994; Tayeb 1994). They doubt that culture is really all that pervasive, taking primacy over all other factors. Important issues remain uncertain, for example which organizational characteristics are formed by culture, how they are influenced by culture and what the relevance of culture is, as compared to economic, technological, psychological as well as institutional factors.

Furthermore, it is also debatable to what degree culture is an independent variable. Cultures themselves are influenced by economic, technological and socio-political factors through the mediation of lifestyle, mass media and ideology (Child 2002). Some critics, therefore, suggest to focus more on institutional forces and historical developments which help to explain managerial differences (still a particularistic position); while others contribute to a large body of empirical evidence which indicates that companies do learn from best practices across cultural boundaries and produce support for the convergence of management practices (the universalistic position). Redding (1994, p. 350) concluded that we should attempt to avoid "seeing culture as a single source of anything and get accustomed to claiming its position as a necessary, but not sufficient determinant of social outcomes." Hofstede's (2002, p. 92) modification of his famous definition of culture strengthens this position. The formulation "maybe preprogramming of the mind" (instead of "programming of the mind") indicates that programming is not a deterministic process. It is ultimately up to each individual what he or she does with it. Culture thus represents a model *for* the behavior of members of a given society rather than a model *of* their behavior (Goodall 2002).

While institutionalist arguments are often brought forward to supplement or even replace cultural arguments, they are also not immune to criticism. Focusing more on historically developed institutional settings to explain differences in management practices, they are equally deterministic in seeing organizational structures and subsequent behavior as largely dependent on context-specific outside factors. As agency theory explains, however, organizations are actively engaged in their environment (Whittington 1992). Managers exert, for example, influence on their legal environment through lobbying and the threat to withdraw from cooperation with government or unions (Braun and Warner 2002; Child 2002).

In conclusion, particularistic positions, based either on cultural or on institutional differences, appear to have limitations as well. Neither universalism nor particularism seems to be able to explain reality fully. This conclusion is even reinforced when taking a closer look at the actual research practices which produces either universalistic or particularistic results.

UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM IN THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH PRACTICE

The previous section established that there are serious arguments against the (sole) validity of either universalism or particularism. These doubts are reinforced when the research practices of scholars are analyzed. Without being able to base the following assessment on empirically tested solid evidence, the subsequent propositions regarding the connection between research practices and the universalism-particularism-controversy should further caution us against uncritically following either full-fledged universalistic or particularistic findings.

First, research objectives may significantly guide the research agenda of individual scholars. Adherents to the universalism approach may be more interested in searching for commonalities, whereas supporters of the particularism approach may focus more on detecting differences among management practices.

Second, scholars in management studies who have developed certain management principles or strategies may have a natural interest in suggesting their universal validity, thus being likely supporters of the universalism approach. On the other side, scholars pursuing area studies may be inclined to demonstrate how particular the country or region they are analyzing is (how else would area studies be justified?) and represent in their majority the particularism approach. It may consequently come as a little surprise that, for example, the basic conclusion of Porter et al.'s (2000) analysis of Japanese management is that successful Japanese management is not fundamentally different from Western management, and that the most important step Japanese companies need to take in order to increase their competitiveness is to focus more on strategy. One of the best known scholars of Japanese society, Ezra Vogel (1979), highlighted in contrast the specifics of Japanese management practices, explaining them on the basis of their very special societal context.

Third, research objectives may determine research objects. Those scholars who look for commonalities among management systems may show a preference for analyzing macro-level phenomena such as certain basic structures and strategies which appear to lead more frequently to universalistic conclusions. In contrast, those seeking to underline differences among management systems may chose to study micro-level aspects such as certain behaviors in organizations because they tend to deliver more particularistic results (see also Child 1981). Furthermore, certain management areas (e.g., finance) may lead more to universalistic outcomes than others (e.g., human resource management) (Laurent 1986). Even within an area such as HRM, some aspects may be of more universal validity than others. Recruitment and training are seen for example as more universalistic, while performance appraisal, promotion and compensation are viewed as less so (Lu and Björkman 1997).

Fourth, research objectives are also linked to research methods. Those closer to universalism may prefer quantitative methods, whereas those scholars favoring the particularism approach may chose qualitative methods, which are often more suited to unearthing subtle differences. Table 1 summarizes these connections.

Table 1: Universalism versus particularism in the context of research practice

	Universalism	*Particularism*
Research objectives	Commonalities	Differences
Research background	Management studies	Area studies
Research objects	Macro-level phenomena	Micro-level phenomena
Research methods	Quantitative	Qualitative

While far from trying to undermine the integrity of research and individual researchers, one should be realistic enough to acknowledge that, in the social sciences, such fundamental debates as universalism versus particularism can hardly be approached without any preconceptions which can influence research practice. This should, consequently, further caution us against declaring either of these two research streams as being more valid than the other.

INTEGRATING UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM: A NATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS SYSTEM

Because of limitations in both the universalism and the particularism approaches and additional doubts stemming from the research context, it appears that efforts to overcome the deadlock of the universalism-particularism debate should not be focused on deciding which position is the more valid one, but on attempting to integrate both in a synthesis model. Hence, the challenge is to include in one model universalistic as well as institutional and cultural particularistic forces and, in addition, to depict the various interdependencies of these factors among themselves and their ultimate relationship with management practices. Given the complexity of these various features and their causal relationships, one can understand why Schöllhammer (1969) already spoke more than three decades ago of a "comparative management jungle". The objective of the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 2 is to transform this jungle into the "orderliness" of a French baroque garden.

Figure 2: Universalities, Particularities and Singularities

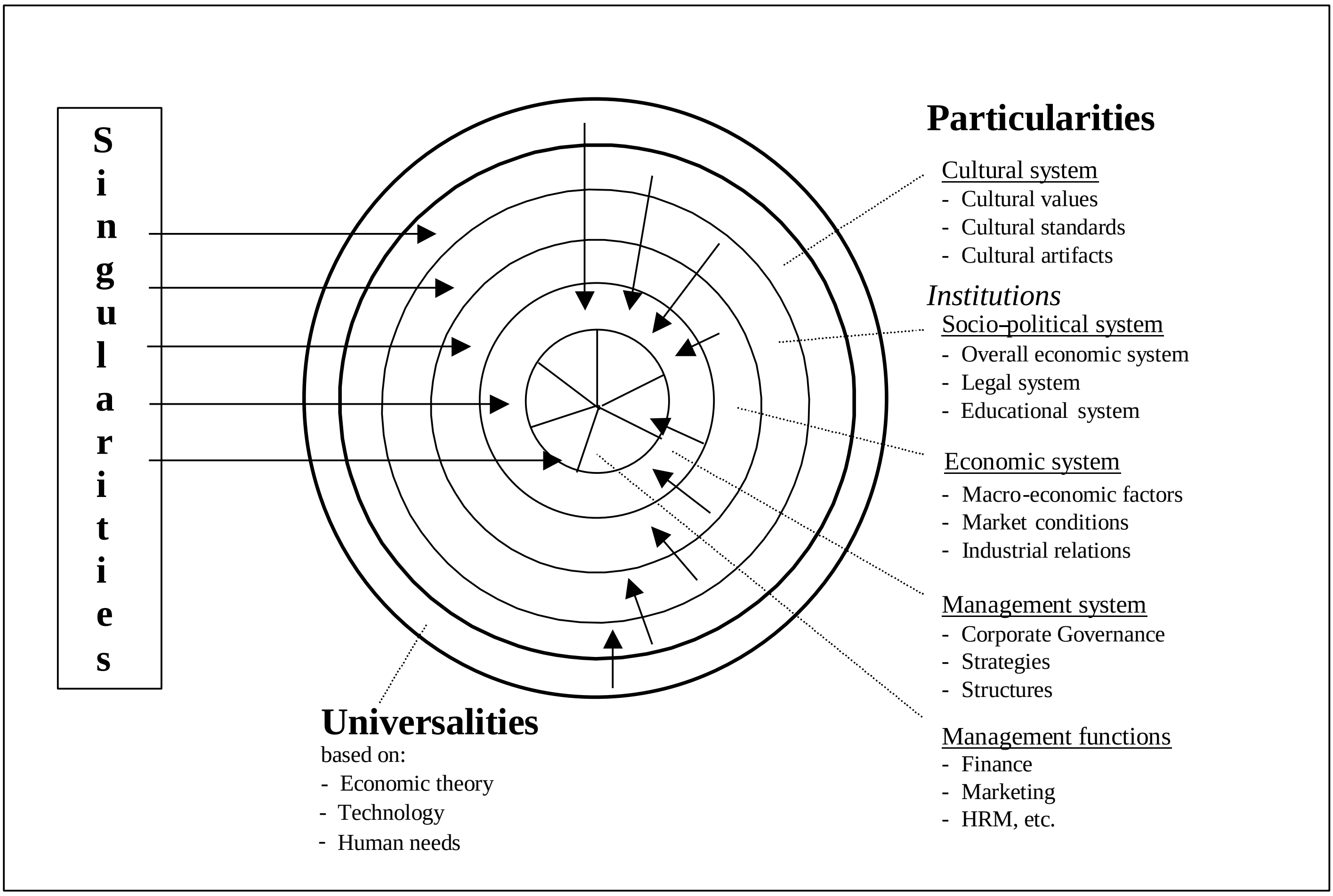


Figure 2 depicts what is labeled here a national competitiveness system. This terminology raises associations with the familiar term of the national business system (Whitley 2000), but emphasizes more that non-business factors also need to be considered in order to determine or improve national competitiveness. The significance of the non-business factors for this model becomes fully evident when analyzing its various components.

The various *management functions* such as finance, marketing and HRM (inner circle in Figure 2) are defined in this model as a sub-system of the *management system*. The *management system* with its corporate governance system, its strategies and organizational structures in its turn is understood as a sub-system of the *economic system*, as the management of a corporation (micro level) is embedded in the respective economic context (macro level): macro-economic factors (e.g. economic growth, inflation, unemployment), market conditions and the employer-employee relations (on the industrial level between employers' associations and unions or between single corporations and their employees). With market conditions aspects such as the national financial markets, distribution of small versus large companies, service versus production industries, high tech versus low tech industries, stand-alone companies versus corporate networks or the criteria of Porter's (1990) national diamond framework (factor conditions; strategy, structure and rivalry; demand conditions; and relating and supporting industries) are summarized.

The *economic system* is determined by the system of the next higher abstraction level, the *socio-political system*. Even though the socio-political sphere comprises more factors, for the national competitiveness the overall economic system, the legal system and the educational system are particularly important. The overall economic system is listed here under the socio-political context as the decision to have a centrally planned economy or a market economy is not left to economic actors but taken on the socio-political level. Even within a market economy the choice between for example a free market economy and a social market economy is made within the socio-political arena. Already with the *socio-political system* this model goes beyond what is usually associated with business aspects. Yet, also non-business factors increasingly matter for the national competitiveness. Education, for example, is perceived more and more as an essential ingredient of national competitiveness and is included in benchmarking processes (e.g., the PISA studies undertaken by OECD, testing and comparing the abilities of pupils in its member states).

Management functions, the management system, the economic system and the socio-political system have in common that they all depict institutional arrangements, though on different levels of abstraction, going from the micro to the macro level. All these various systems are perceived here as sub-systems to the *cultural system* which largely influences which institutional solutions a society develops to organize itself. A cultural system comprises cultural values, standards and artifacts. An understanding of different cultural values of various nations can be obtained through studies such as those by Hofstede (1980), Hall and Hall (1990); Trompenaars (1998) and House et al. (2004) who all established various dimensions measuring cultural values. Cultural standards are less abstract as they refer to perceptions, judgments and actions considered to be normal by most members of a given culture (Thomas 1993; Fink and Meierewert 2001). Cultural artifacts are finally on the least abstract level as they encompass concrete cultural products, rituals and symbols (Schein 1985). The *cultural system* and its four sub-systems on the institutional level make up the particularistic sphere of a society, as it differs from country to country. The *particularities* with their various sub-systems are finally a sub-system of the *universalities* which by definition apply to all countries. As previously explained universalities in the economic sphere are based on imperatives stemming from economic theory, technology and human needs. (The last component of this model, singularities, will be discussed further below.)

This model achieves the purposes outlined above to include and integrate as explanatory variables for management, both universalistic forces and particularistic ones. It also distinguishes between culture and institutional factors. More importantly, the systemic approach chosen for this model, with super- and sub-systems of different hierarchical order, allows for the depiction of how the various factors influence management and each other (e.g., for the U.S. American, Japanese and German business systems, see Pudelko 2000, 2006). Finally, this model is outcome-neutral in so far as it allows either universalities or particularities to be stressed in individual research projects as long as the importance of both is recognized.

However, the relative simplicity of this model requires qualifications of four kinds. First, the distinction between universalities and particularities is not as clear-cut as suggested. It was pointed out previously that imperatives, stemming from economic theory, the application and in particular the development of new technology and even the definition of human needs cannot necessarily be perceived as independent from their cultural and institutional contexts. Equally, the cultural and institutional spheres also cannot be understood without taking into account the influences of the universalistic sphere. Cultures and institutions can after all be defined by the solutions they offer to universal problems. Finally, not only are the universalistic and the particularistic spheres interlinked but, also within the particularistic sphere, cultural and institutional concepts cannot be understood separately from each other. The example of the interest rates, provided above, illustrates these various interdependencies.

Second, one has to distinguish between direct and indirect influences. All levels of contextual factors (universal, cultural, socio-political, economic) exert a direct and immediate influence on the management system of a country (depicted by the four arrows in the top right quarter of Figure 2): for example, human needs (universalities) directly influence a management system, and so do specific values (culture), laws (socio-political system) and market conditions (economic system). In addition, there are indirect influences, which “trickle down” from the most abstract level of contextual factors to the most concrete ones – for example, human needs (universalities) influence for example specific values (culture) which influence laws (socio-political system). Laws in their turn influence market conditions (economic system) which influence management strategies (management system) which ultimately influence the management functions. These indirect influences are depicted by the five arrows in the bottom right quarter of Figure 2, as they move from the outer to the inner circles. It is because of the combination of direct and indirect influences that it is very difficult to establish if contextual factors of a lower level of abstraction (in Figure 2 represented by the inner circles, e.g. industrial relations) or of a higher level of abstraction (in Figure 2 represented by the outer circles, e.g. culture) matter more in influencing certain management practices. On the one hand, the influence exerted by the industrial-relations system may be more immediate and direct with regard to, for example, the hiring practices of a company; on the other hand, because of the indirect influences, the industrial relations system itself can ultimately be traced back to culture.

Third, the direction of influences is not going just from the more abstract super-systems (represented by the outer circles) to the more concrete sub-systems (represented by the inner circles) as the arrows indicate. There are also feedback influences of all sorts which would have to be depicted by reversing the direction of all the arrows. In Japan, for example, the increasing necessity for companies to generate more profits in order to survive (corporate finance as a sub-system of management) puts pressure on Japanese companies to be more sensitive in their strategies and corporate governance towards the interests of shareholders (management). Shareholders demand more transparent rules and regulations in the financial markets (economic context). More open and transparent rules and regulations furthermore have had substantial reverberations on how the entire Japanese societal model operates, as it needs to depart from the closed system of "Japan Inc." and become a more open and global player (socio-political context). Becoming more open to foreign influences clearly has a strong impact on Japanese values (cultural context) as the Japanese are traditionally very conscious of their unique "Japaneseness". Finally, changing values imply a modification of the needs structure of Japanese people (universal context), which becomes more individualistic and short-term oriented.

Fourth, causalities are not as deterministic as the division into super-systems and sub-systems and the flows of influences in Figure 2 may suggest. Indeed, proponents of context-free universalism depict the development of management systems towards best practices as being determined by universalities (economic theory, technology, human needs) while proponents of context-dependent particularism emphasize the continuing diversity of management systems as the latter are determined by the continuing diversity of particular contextual factors (culture and institutions). What these opposites have in common is that they take a deterministic perspective. However, each (sub)system in this model should not be understood as an automatic result of the influences from other levels since each (sub)system contains the possibility if not necessity of autonomous decisions and developments and has an interdependent but still separate identity on its own. This is even more so as this system is not closed, but open to unique outside influences which are called here "singularities". This autonomy appears even logically necessary since otherwise universal human needs would result in universal cultures and institutions, leaving no room for any particular differentiation. Singularities exert their influence on each level of the model (depicted by the five arrows on the left of Figure 2).

Hofstede (1980) explained, for example, the differences between Romanic and Germanic countries in terms of power distance with the historic advent of long-term Roman occupation in the former which made these countries more used to central authority (cultural context). Russians, Poles and Chinese did not necessarily become communists (socio-political context) because of their particular culture, but because of the victory of the Bolsheviks over the Mensheviks, of the Soviet dominance over Poland and of Mao's triumph over Chiang Kai-Shek. This is not to say that culture has had no influence on how these communist systems operated. For example, the continuing strong influence of retired Chinese communist leaders (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin) can be explained by the Confucian respect for age.

Furthermore, the lessened influence of unions in the UK (economic context) might be better explained by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher winning the power struggle with union leader Arthur Scargill than by any abstract development on the socio-political level. The unique corporate cultures of companies such as Microsoft, Apple, Sony and Toyota (management system) are probably better understood by looking at the personalities of their founders Bill Gates, Steven Jobs, Akio Morita and Kiichiro Toyoda than by focusing only on the economic context of the United States or Japan. And finally, the success of Milka chocolate in Europe might be better explained by the quite unique color of its packaging (marketing) than by any corporate strategy. Each example demonstrates the influence that singularities can have. National competitiveness systems at each level are consequently not only subject to influences from within the system but also to outside influences from (frequently overlooked) singularities.

Given the complexities of the four qualifications of the framework depicted in Figure 2 that have just been outlined, Schölhammer's "comparative management jungle" could not have been transformed into the tidy neatness of a French baroque garden, as was previously intended, but at least to that of an English landscape garden of the romantic period, that combined order and symmetry with elements left to chance and the unforeseeable.

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

I demonstrated that the tension between universalism and particularism cannot ultimately be resolved in favor of one or the other position, but is an inbuilt feature of an ongoing historical development for both dynamics to function simultaneously within actual societies. This article therefore rejects the inherent dualism of most contributions in this area. Instead, universalities and particularities should be understood as co-existing, closely intertwined and influencing each other. Competitive pressures, on the one hand, stimulate learning from best practices which, in turn, leads to convergence tendencies. International division of labor and increasing integration of production processes around the globe require, on the other hand, that companies define their own competitive strengths and differentiate themselves from each other, and this militates against convergence. The persistent influence of the specific cultural and institutional context results moreover in continuity of management practices within countries and in plurality and diversity of management practices among countries. Universalistic forces thus do not predetermine how social entities develop. Instead, they create challenges and pressures to which societies, economies and organizations need to find answers which are in accordance with their cultural and institutional contexts (Smith and Meiskins 1995).

The question of the universal validity of (Western) "best practices" within the area of management finds a parallel in one of the most fundamental debates in political studies as to whether the concepts of democracy and human rights are of universal validity, despite the fact that they actually originated in the Western world? It is held here that these two principles are indeed of universal value, even though their development can only be understood under the specific historical context of the Western world. However, what democracy and human rights actually signify and how to define and apply them might be subject to more culture-specific interpretation. The Western understanding of both concepts certainly emphasizes the rights of each individual, whereas Asian or African societies for example might prefer a more collectivistic interpretation (Hofstede 1980).

In addition to making a contribution to the universalism-particularism debate which has been defined here as the most fundamental controversy in cross-cultural or cross-national management research, this article addresses a series of more practical issues as well. The first is to what degree learning from foreign management models is possible. The strong influence of the particular societal context on a management model should not be interpreted as making cross-cultural learning processes impossible but as limiting the potential of cross-cultural adaptation to what is still within the “fit” of the respective societal context. Adopting foreign management practices thus appears particularly likely to succeed in those instances where this adoption process is based on a cultural and institutional foundation which is equally valid for both the country of origin as well as for the adopting country. Where this is not the case, foreign practices might provide inspiration which needs, however, to be adapted in a way that establishes a fit with the domestic context. Instead of slavishly following one model which is perceived to be the most successful, the actual challenge is to integrate ideas from abroad with domestic patterns of doing things.

If certain management methods appear to be particularly successful and of some universal validity, it is likely that they will proliferate within certain parameters in other countries. However, the way and extent to which they permeate the organizations of a given society will ultimately be determined by conditions in the society. “Best practices” are the easiest to imitate in mass production industries such as cars and consumer electronics. Fordism, Toyotaism, just-in-time, total quality management, quality circles and M-form are buzz-words which illustrate “best practices” that achieved global propagation. Some players are more pro-active in adopting best practice (e.g., top-managers of international companies) while others are more defensive (e.g., trade unionists). The degree to which foreign practices can be adopted thus also depends on such domestic contingencies as the relative power of the various actors. Finally, the co-existence of several countries which might simultaneously be perceived as home of “best practices” of different kinds will reinforce pluralism and eclecticism in cross-national learning processes (Smith and Meiskins 1995).

Closely related to the question of learning from foreign management practices is the issue of standardization versus localization of management practices (or integration versus differentiation of MNCs). Standardization is possible when the concerned practices do not conflict with any of the relevant cultural or institutional contextual factors. The model in Figure 2 might serve here as a kind of “checklist”, as it indicates potential particularistic forces which might work against standardization. In those cases where a contextual factor might clash with a particular management practice, a more localized approach might be advisable. It seems that management research and practice are gradually moving in the direction of solving the standardization-localization dilemma by not perceiving management as a monolithic entity. Different degrees of standardization might be introduced according to different levels of abstraction – for example, there might be more standardization at the strategy level and more localization at the implementation level (Braun and Warner 2002).

Finally, the model developed here could assist in systematizing the various components of a national competitiveness system which might be useful in determining the current state of competitiveness and where actions are required to increase competitiveness. Furthermore, this model visualizes and illustrates the degree to which a national competitiveness model is a complex, multi-level and multidimensional integrative as well as open system, combining at the micro-level management practices and at the macro-level economics, the socio-political sphere, culture and even universal elements.

It becomes evident that a national competitiveness system is not limited to what businesses do. Any efforts to improve the competitiveness of a country must consequently take a holistic approach, tackling all levels of the competitiveness system and be sensitive to the multifold interconnections of its various components. This should also encourage policy makers to find benchmarks and define "best practices" abroad for each of the various levels of a national competitiveness system, very much like companies do with their competitors. Again, the challenge would be less in adopting those "best practices" but in adapting them to their own cultural and institutional contexts. Globalization should thus be understood as building on the competitive advantages of different countries rather than homogenizing them.

UNIVERSALITIES, PARTICULARITIES AND SINGULARITIES IN FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

It has been demonstrated that universalistic arguments emphasizing the convergence of management practices, and particularistic arguments suggesting non-convergence have both merits and limitations and therefore appear to be most useful if combined into one integrated framework. But what does this mean when trying to predict future developments in management systems? If convergence tendencies would be counter-balanced by divergence tendencies (the usually employed terms) of roughly equal weight, then both forces would in the end equal themselves out and the status quo would more or less be left untouched. However, as previously stated, divergence (moving apart) is actually a misleading term since supporters of this approach usually "only" hold that management practices remain different because of continuing differences in the societal context (non-convergence) without further moving apart. If we assume, however, that in each period some management practices converge because of universal forces and others not because of particularistic forces, the net effect over a long period of time would be increasing convergence. Indeed, the following arguments give credence to this stance.

As regards economic systems, more countries than ever before now embrace the principles of the market economy. Also within market economies, the differences between free-market economies of an Anglo-Saxon stamp, the social-market economies of a continental European character and the government-guided market economies of East Asia seem to be decreasing – with the shareholder value philosophy of free-market principles currently being on the rise, social-market economies on the defensive, and government-guided economies under significant pressure to adopt what is perceived as "best practices" of the more liberal economies (profit orientation, transparency of financial markets, effective corporate governance, etc.). The forces of globalization appear to have reinforced this trend of learning from "best practices".

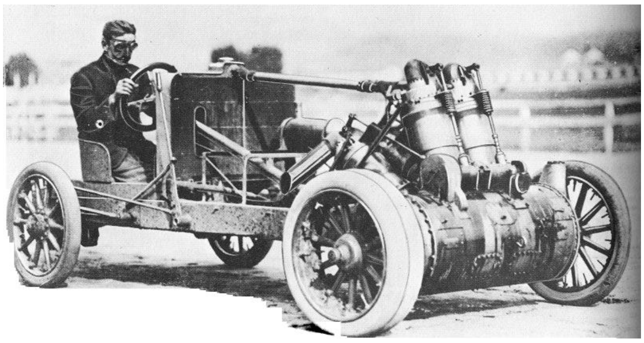
Furthermore, convergence tendencies are not limited to the economic sphere, but affect also the socio-political level and even culture. Some of these changes are again spurred by a (correct) understanding of the broader complexities of national competitiveness. For example, knowing about the damaging effect of corruption to entice FDI, many countries have successfully reduced it. At the cultural level, increasing individualization appears to be a global trend, strongly linked with rising affluence – a trend also acknowledged by Hofstede (1980) who otherwise stresses the persistence of cultural values. Therefore, if some convergence tendencies are apparent even on the cultural level, they should certainly be possible on the management level where social implications are less fundamental and competitive pressures much stronger. In other words, one could argue that universalism, or convergence, is the more important approach after all, if a sufficiently long time horizon is chosen.

Indeed, it is argued here that, in *absolute* terms, management practices of different business systems, as a consequence of international competition, become over time more and more similar (the convergence argument). However, another point being made here is that those remaining differences which are difficult if not impossible to overcome due to cultural and institutional embeddedness gain in their *relative* importance, as they become all the more decisive in the race for competitive advantage among otherwise increasingly similar management systems (the non-convergence argument).

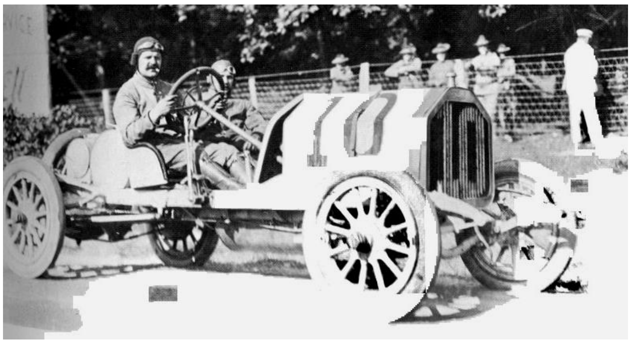
The following analogy illustrates this point. If we consider racing cars, we notice that the differences between them were in the beginning of car racing much more striking than today (see Figure 3a and b).

Figure 3: Illustration of convergence

Figure 3 a: Racing cars 1905

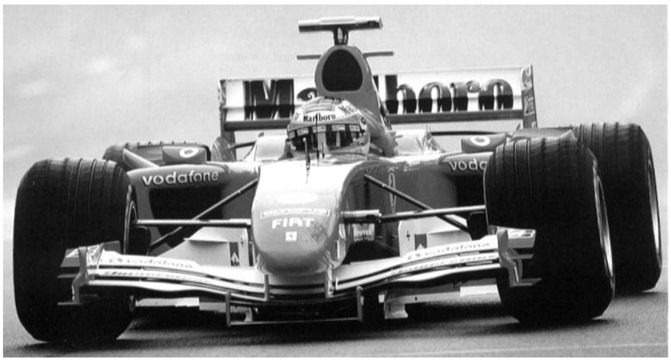


Christie



Buick

Figure 3b: Racing cars 2005



Ferrari

McLaren Mercedes

In earlier times, they still relied on different technological concepts, looked consequently very differently and their performance could differ considerably. In contrast, today's Formula 1 cars are all based on very similar technologies, look very much alike and the differences in their times per lap can only be measured in milliseconds. However, that does not mean that it does not matter any more who comes in first and who second. Even if the differences decrease (in absolute terms), the importance of the remaining differences increases (in relative terms). The primary reason for both trends is competition, next to the harmonization of rules. Similarly, the race for competitive advantage forces companies to orient themselves towards optimal solutions and it gives the differences which still exist and the possibilities to differentiate themselves from other an even greater significance.

Hence, what might be expected for future development is a continuous convergence in the sense of a rapprochement of the different management models and a decrease in the spread of variations among them in their struggle for global competitiveness – without, however, assuming that the different models will ever converge into one system. It can therefore be assumed that "the (context-free) universalism approach" will become more important in absolute terms – that is, there are more and more similarities among the systems – whereas "the (context-dependent) particularism approach" increases in its relative significance – that is, the remaining differences become relatively more and more important. Thus, the bottom line seems to be that an "integrated universalism-particularism approach" which takes into account singularities is the model which reflects reality best.

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