A Comparative Study of Inter-cultural Educational Decision-making

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Bio
Paul Chua is currently a EdD student of the National Institute of Education, Singapore and Institute of Education, London. In his professional life, he is currently a Principal on Special Projects, working in the Educational Leadership Development Centre on the conceptualisation and development of leadership and leadership development policies and programmes for Principals, Vice-Principals and Middle Managers. Before this posting, he was a senior assessor of school quality in the School Appraisal Branch and a Principal of a Secondary School. In addition, he has been a physics teacher, senior curriculum specialist, head of Science department and a Vice-Principal.

Academically, Paul Chua studied for a BA and MA at University of Cambridge and an EdM at Harvard University. He received the Fulbright Scholarship for his studies at Harvard. In the principalship executive programme that he attended in 2003, he was awarded the Lee Kuan Yew Prize for being the top overall performing student in the Leaders in Education Programme, conducted at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to discuss the origin of the research problem related to the area of inter-cultural educational decision-making, the formulation of the research questions and some research methodological issues related to the investigation of the research questions. The source of the research problem can be traced to the roots of inter-cultural cognitive psychology and inter-cultural social psychology. A practical perspective related to the author's observation of working experience also contributes to the illumination of the research problem. The process of scoping the research questions will then be examined, highlighting problematic-ness of definitions of culture and research issues on culture. A justification will be made on the choice of the research paradigm i.e. interpretativism to be adopted and a discussion of some proposals to mitigate the problematic-ness in societal culture research will be presented.

<u>Introduction</u>

I have a general interest in the area of decision-making. This interest is related to a general interest and curiosity on cognitive thinking. I am fascinated by how we could maximize our sense of fulfillment and productivity through being a more skilful thinker. I have in my professional work experience worked in a number of fields related to thinking.

For example, I had worked on developing lesson plans related to the explicit teaching of thinking skills and the infusion of thinking skills into science when I was a junior officer in the Ministry's Curriculum Planning and Development Division. Even before that, when I was teaching Physics in a Junior College, I was dabbling in the idea of a systems-approach to problem solving in Physics. When I became a school leader1, my concerns were on school development through the processes of systems thinking and design, as well as hypothesis-testing as an approach to strategy-making.

My interest in the cognitive process of decision-making – the topic of my research study - is motivated by the fact that effective decision-making is so crucial to leadership itself. Making sound decisions is critical to clear direction-charting for an organization. Sound decision-making is also important from another organizational perspective as it enables the sound allocation of resources to the various priorities of the organization. Resources are the lifelines to the organisation's sustenance. Without or with a shortage of resources, the organization just cannot function. Even the best laid plans, and human aspirations and dreams, cannot be operationalised and materialized.

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[1] School Leader in this paper is defined as a Vice Principal or Principal, in line with the normal usage in the Ministry of Education, Singapore.

Coupled with my desire to reconnect with my heritage – an ethnic Chinese Singaporean – I decided to investigate for my EdD thesis on the problem of how school leaders of different cultures make decisions.

<div align="center">Origins of the Research Problem</div>

One could trace the origin of the research problem form both the perspectives of the academic disciplines and the professional disciplines (Dowling & Brown, 2010).

From the academic discipline of cognitive psychology, Nisbett (2003) argues, through philosophical and empirical means, that Asians and Westerners think differently. For example, findings from examinations of Confucianist texts generally indicate that the mind of a follower of Confucianism would be perceiving and processing information that emphasise a focus on harmony, holism and the finding of the Golden Mean (Chen, 1990; Nisbett, 2003). On the other hand, a person educated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition would be adept at decontextualised, atomistic and dialectical thinking (Nisbett, 2003).

A number of researchers (e.g. Cole & Scribner, 1974; Nakamura, 1985) have investigated the origins of mentalities, which according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary is defined as ways of thought. The general conclusion is that the critical factor influencing the epistemology and cognitive processes of the mind is social in nature i.e. your culture. This thesis has been termed as the 'Social Origins of the Mind' by Nisbett (2003). The converse is also true. One's cognitive processing would impact the social environment of the person through, say, how decisions are made.

Given this backdrop, a corollary is that an Asian make would perceive and process information differently from a Westerner in decision making situations.

For another perspective from the <u>academic discipline</u>, we could refer to the findings of <u>inter-cultural social psychology</u>. Social psychologists have found differences in national cultures based on certain dimensions applied across the world. Whilst criticisms have been leveled at it (Dimmock & Walker, 2000), the most widely used of which is due to Hofstede (1990) who discovered through his study that people differ based on the dimensions of low versus high power distance; low versus high uncertainly avoidance; muscularity versus femininity; individualism versus collectivism; and short-term versus long-term orientation.

Given such cultural differences in values and behaviours, one could expect the decision-making processes used in response to the same situations to vary across people of different cultures. For example, according to Hofstede's (1990) data, Singaporeans have a greater proclivity to make decisions with a longer-term orientation than Americans.

As this is a module of a professional doctorate, it is necessary to inquire into the origin of the research problem from the <u>professional disciplines</u>. From my literature search, I have found virtually no literature on how educational decisions are made in different societal cultures, though there are articles on cross-cultural educational leadership.

However, from my <u>professional work experience</u>, I encountered interesting episodes on how decisions are being made in a culture different from my own. When I was doing my Masters degree course in America in the early 2000s, I often heard remarks such as: "What does the research say?" or a variant like "What does the data say?" These questions were asked of us students when we had to make decisions on how to proceed in the situation at hand, be they case studies or general discussion points in class. My thoughts then were that surely whilst it is

useful to make data-based decisions, I just felt that we could not just rely on data to guide us in decision-making. Firstly, what if the research in the area of need has yet to yield any conclusive results or has yet to be researched on. Even if, a piece of research is subsequently commissioned, it would take quite a while before the results are ready for dissemination, to be used by practitioners. Secondly, how can we be so confident of the generalisability of the causal effect relationships, when social situations are themselves so complex with many confounding variables that cannot possibly be completely controlled? To me, relying solely or even mainly on data to make informed decisions was to me an incomplete world view of how we could make effective decisions.

Contrast that to a situation that I am quite familiar back home – how senior bureaucrats in MOE Singapore make educational decisions. I would wonder how these senior bureaucrats could make educational decisions to novel or complex situations in face of lack of educational research results in the Singapore context. We must remember that there is not much educational knowledge based on research in Singapore context. However, I have heard words such as "I sense that …", "On balance, we should be doing this …" and "Our collection of soft data indicates …" being used in discussions. It seems that without recourse to complete research findings of effectiveness of educational interventions, they could still make effective decisions, the cumulative effect of which has enabled our education system to be widely admired by the world.

So, my American experience gave me a sense that generalized research findings were a critical resource to decision making. On the other hand, my experience back here in Singapore suggests that effective decision making could still be masterfully achieved without complete

research knowledge or data but also through factors such as experience, common sense, and knowledge from other domains besides education.

Potential Usefulness/Significance of the Research

To the academic community, the new knowledge arising from this investigation would contribute to the store of academic knowledge on cross-cultural decision-making. This would especially be of welcome to the academic community. For example, various researchers have said that the pace of research in inter-cultural decision-making "has been quite slow" (Choi, Choi & Norenzayam, 2004, p. 504) and cross-cultural research in decision-making is still "in its infancy" (Markman & Medin, 2002, p. 456). Yet according to Weber & Hsee (2000) "Past and current levels of attention given to cultural determinants of decision making are not just low, but are inadequate." (p. 34) Whilst this quote may have been taken from a 2000 paper, note what Choi, Choi & Norenzayam (2004) said of the progress since then: the Weber & Hsee (2000) paper is "the most comprehensive one to date" (p. 506) as "few new studies on culture and decision-making been published" (p. 506) since then.

The state of knowledge on cross-cultural decision-making in the professional disciplines is similarly underdeveloped, as already mentioned above. However, the new knowledge stemming from this study would undoubtedly be useful to practitioners in the professional community as they could adapt or apply the generalisations arising from the study to their own decision making situations, thereby contributing to more instances of effective organizational decision-making. I had earlier argued how much effective decision-making is a integral part of good leadership.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of the research is to explore and explain how decisions are made and why they are made in the way they have been made amongst School Leaders in Singapore and England.

Research Questions (RQ)

1)   How do School Leaders make decisions?

>   a)   How do Chinese (or SAP school-educated) School Leaders leading SAP schools in Singapore make decisions and why were the decisions made in the way they were made?

>   b)   How do English School Leaders make decisions and why were the decisions made in the way they were made?

>   c)   What differences and similarities are there?

>   d)   Why do these differences and similarities exist?

2)   Drawing from 1d), what generalisations can be made to facilitate effective decision-making in ill-structured situations?

Clarifications on A) the term "Culture"; B) Choice of Research Subjects; and C) Direction of Generalisation Question (i.e. RQ 2 above)

Culture

A point of clarification here is that 'culture' in this investigation refers to societal culture as opposed to organizational culture. Whilst organisational culture does impact on decision-making, the objective of the study is to explicate how societal culture impacts decision-making. In reviewing the literature, Hallinger & Heck (1996) "hypothesise that the societal culture exerts a significant influence on administrators beyond that of the specific organisation's culture" (p. 106). Having clarified that it is societal culture that we are investigating here, it is important to clarify the constitution of societal culture, which would enable one to subsequently adequately

explain for the variance seen. The approach taken is that one needs to constitute societal culture to include both the "distinctive cultural traits that have endured over time" (Inglehart, 2000, p. 81) and the country-unique contextual knowledge such as the economic, political and religious characteristics that shape the country. Dimmock & Walker (2005) said that "an exclusive focus on either perspective may risk constructing an incomplete picture" (p. 48). They concluded that "while we maintain that comparative study in educational leadership … should … be grounded in, culture, they must also take account of other social, political and geographical, and economic environmental factors within which societies and school exist and operate" (p. 48). Ribbins & Gronn (2000) research methodology approach called for the simultaneous attending to "specific cultural and structural circumstances" (p.41) of the situation.

The fact that the socio-political-economic dimension cannot be ignored in the understanding of societal culture could be understood by what Sharpe & Gopinathan (2000) had written: "we believe that a sociopolitical perspective offers richer (than the Hofstedeian) detailing of culture in interaction with schooling." (p. 87). This statement provides an interesting context to compare and contrast some articles that appeared in a special issue of Asia Pacific Journal of Education in 2000 on cross-cultural school leadership. In the special issue, the authors either only considered the impact of Hofstedeian framework on leadership styles , devoid of any consideration of the larger socio-political framework, or, just on the larger socio-political framework without the influences of the Hofstedeian framework.

I argue that the works of Sharpe & Gopinathan (2000) and those that appeared in the special issue of the Asia Pacific Journal of Education are therefore unsatisfactory in the conceptual design of "culture". To have a good grip of explaining variance in decision-making due to the influence of national culture, I argue that both the enduring and economic-political

dimensions need to be considered. For example, whilst we know that Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are predominantly ethnically Chinese societies, the development course and histories of these three countries are so different. As such, decisions made on political issues are quite different. For example, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, there is an acknowledged more political openness in the society as compared to Singapore.

<u>Choice of Research Subjects</u>

From an examination of the choice of research subjects used in a number of cross-cultural decision-making studies (e.g. Heller & Wilpert, 1977; MacCrimmon & Wehrung, 1986, cited in McDaniels & Gregory, 1991; Wrights et al., 1978; Wrights & Phillips, 1980), one could conclude that the "research tradition2" of this field is to enlist the participation of research subjects from different countries and probe them on their responses to the topic in question. Therefore, I have decided on the choice of English School Leaders living in England as opposed to Anglo-American-school leaders in Anglo-American schools in Singapore when I presented at the end of module seminar on our essay outline.

Next, I would like to clarify why the choice of Chinese School Leaders as research subjects. The question is "Why Chinese Singaporeans?" as opposed to just "Singaporeans", as the module participants asked me on the last day of the module. To address their concerns, we need to take cognizance that cultures are not monolithic even within Singapore, for example, Eurasian Singaporean School Leaders might make decision differently from Chinese Singapore School Leaders, as my interaction with my supervisor in my current post would testify. According to Tjosvold & Leung (1998), "In Malaysia, Malay, and Chinese and Indian managers

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[2] According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), one ought to be acquainted with the research tradition (e.g. the research questions and research methods) of the field that one is researching in. In my case, the field concerns inter-cultural decision-making or the inter-cultural facet of any academic or professional discipline e.g. international management.

have their own value systems" (p. 336)" and as a result they approach conflict resolution in different ways too, reflecting their inherent values.

A further question that one could ask is: "Why are Chinese School Leaders operationalised as 'SAP school-educated School Leaders'?" Here, we need to recognize that cultures are not static in nature; it is shifting and dynamic in nature. With increasing globalization, the dynamic and shifting nature of culture is even more pronounced. Look at how traditional cultures have been modified with western ideas as modernization takes its developmental course. Various authors such as Rizvi (1997) have termed "cultures" as "hybrids" as we "cannot know cultures in their pristine and authentic form. Instead, our focus must shift to the ways in which culture forms become separated and recombine with new forms in new practices in their local contexts'. (p. 22). Whilst this shift or hybridization form of culture makes research into inter-cultural effects more troublesome, it does not lessen the importance of examining the impact of culture on decision-making. Thus, my choice of SAP school-educated School Leaders is actually an attempt to obtain as "pure" a sample of Chinese Singaporean as possible. In fact, as religions play an important in contributing to the world view of people, my choice of local samples is actually nuanced as "non-Christian SAP school-education School Leaders".

Direction of Generalisation Question

In line with McDaniels & Gregory's (1991) recommendation, it has been argued that future studies should be prescriptive in nature in that they shed light on "how to do a better job making complex decisions." (p. 125) Thus, it is the loftier aim of this investigation that I could draw some generalizations or learning points on how to make decisions in ill-structured (Simon,

1973) situations. "Ill-structured" is defined as a situation in which its existing state and the desired state are unclear and, hence, the methods of reaching the desired state cannot be found or they are many possible answers to the problem as it is complex and ill defined (definition after Simon, 1973).

<div align="center">Research Paradigm, Methodology, Method and Validity</div>

Research Paradigm

There is no research tradition to refer to on inter-cultural education decision-making, and that the state of research into inter-cultural education is nascent (see Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). However, the cross-cultural perspective in other cognate subjects has enjoyed relatively more attention.

It is to these other cognate subjects that we would turn to understand the "research traditions" of cross-cultural decision-making as Dimmock & Walker (2005) had themselves similarly recommended that cross-cultural studies of educational leadership glean from the developments of other fields such as cross-cultural psychology, international management, anthropology, amongst others.

From international management field of study, one learns of the recommendation to use the interpretative paradigm, instead of the positivist paradigm (Redding, 1994). Further, Hallinger & Heck (1996) argued for a more naturalistic approach to research of inter-cultural educational leadership so as to "understand the more complex processes that underlie [the] set of observed interactions" (p. 14).

In fact, even without recourse to the "research traditions", one could infer that the interpretative paradigm should be the appropriate paradigm for this investigation. As

"questions … should drive the enterprise" (Shavelson & Towne, 2004, p. ?), we could infer form the form of the RQs – that they deal with issues of "how" and "why" – that these questions are best answered through an interpretative paradigm. In Eisenhart (2005), she wrote "qualitative … research designs are needed to answer … questions … about the processes that make antecedents work" (p. 255). And, the interpretative paradigm belongs to the qualitative class of research modes.

My normal reflexive preference is <u>not</u> to use a quantitative approach. The key reason is that a quantitative approach through say a survey is not holistic enough to do research on culture, which is essentially holistic in nature. For example, a survey cannot probe the richness of the respondent's reactions as the short survey items cannot capture the authenticity of the context of the ill-structured situations requiring decision-making. In addition, the options available for respondents to select may be too inadequate in determining the nuances of how they themselves would make the decisions, even if the options have been arrived at after a piloting with a representative sample. The survey items, in spite of attempts at piloting and subsequent revision, cannot achieve universal common understanding of the survey items by all respondents, hence affecting the validity of the survey instrument.

In Dimmock & Walker (2000), they claimed that a quantitative approach to the research poses another challenge – that survey respondents "may not be fully aware of their values and ideologies and thus cannot report them accurately" (p. 115). However, this problem, too, exists in field-based interpretative research. For example, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) said that "Subjects, or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions …" (p. 21). However, in the latter, the interviewer could follow-up with prompts for clarifications and

revisiting, till the researcher is adequately satisfied that the respondents have reasonably

searched through his being for the "answers"

Research Methodology[3]

From the research tradition of inter-cultural decision making, Weber & Hsee (2000) one

learns that it is appropriate to use the comparative methodology of cross-cultural research i.e. to

shed light on inter-cultural differences, a comparative method ought to be used so as to create the

conditions to afford the drawing of conclusions between cultures.

In addition, as my investigation involves the eventual generation of a theory of decision-

making (RQ 1d and 2), the appropriate research methodology is Grounded Theory. Grounded

Theory entails the encoding of data collection on how decisions are made by Singapore and

English School Leaders, the categorization of these codes into meaningful themes and the

connecting of these themes into a meaning theory that explains the impact of societal cultures on

decision-making (Creswell, 2008).

Research Method[4]

From the research tradition of inter-cultural decision making, one gets the advice to avoid

the pitfall of failing to distinguish between cultural versus situational determinants, a caution

advanced by McDaniels & Gregory (1991). The need to sieve out influences on decision-

making that are more situational in nature i.e. less attributable to fundamental cultural

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[3] Research Methodology as used in Tom O'Donoghue (2007) refers to the strategy, approach or general plan of action that operationalises the answering of the paradigm-related research questions. Alternative names to research methodology are approaches to inquiry/research (Creswell, 2007), trategies of inquiry (Creswell, 2009) and research strategy (Punch, 2006).

[4] As defined by Creswell (2009), research methods concern the manner of data collection, data analysis and interpretation that the researcher would use in the investigation. Therefore, for this section of this assignment, I would be explicating some ideas on data collection, while leaving to the assignment for the second research methods module to elaborate on research methods on data analysis and interpretation.

differences is important, if one were to conduct a valid investigation into cultural influences on decision-making. Situational determinants include the effects of organizational culture on decision-making, as there is variance between subjects' responses to the situations even within the same country (because they hail form different organizations).

To minimize the situational effects on decision-making, it has been recommended that the research methods involve multiple dependent measures (Johnson, 1991). The idea is that one could still see the same underlying influence of culture on the different decision-making situations at hand. A logical corollary from the latter idea will be that a mosaic-building approach of multiple research methodologies will be needed in data collection (Weber & Hsee, 1999). Put in another way, a multi-modal approach of probing respondents is suggested to triangulate findings in an attempt to 'drill' down into commonalities that we could reasonably attribute to societal culture factors. With respect to the research questions, this advice of multiple research methodologies is particularly relevant to RQ 1a) and 1b).

From the literature, one could glean the from "research tradition" with regards to methods used in cross-cultural research in data collection. Examples include:

> a) Presenting research subjects with a common set of an in-basket of ill-structured scenarios that require decision-making (Dimmock, 2007; Guttentag & Sayeki, 1975; Tse et al., 1988);
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> b) Semi-structured or unfolding (Punch, 2006) interviewing of respondents of their past encounters with ill-structured5 problems and how they successfully solved them.
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> c) Observation of actual decision-making in progress, if permission is granted by research subjects (after Alison, 1999). In the literature, Ribbins & Gronn (2000)

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[5] It is especially critical to probe our samples on "ill-structured" situations so that we could better achieve internal validity and contribute to the drawing of generalized findings (i.e. RQ 2) for a larger group of people to make decisions in "ill-structured" situations.

have called this method "Multiple Perspectives in Action" as we could explore what principals say in the context of what they say and do.

<u>Internal Validity</u>

From Brown's seminar during the module, he claimed that for research to be interesting and or value to others, it needs to be able to generate generalisable findings. Given this need, it is necessary that we examine the internal validity6 of the research design through the controlling of <u>confounding variables</u> inherent in the investigations (Vierra, Pollock & Golez, 1997).

From research carried out by Briley et al. (2000) when studying the consumer choices of East Asians and European Americans, they found that respondents chose more in accordance to their expected cultural inclinations when the respondents were also at the same time made to give reasons for their choices than when the just made choices alone. Under time pressure to make a decision, research subjects also make choices more according to their cultural proclivities, as Chiu et al. (2000) reasoned that people are more likely to rely on their cultural scripts to make quick decisions. Hong et al. (1997) discovered that when respondents were exposed to icons of Chinese and American cultures, the respondents were more likely to display a more Chinese-like or American-like, depending on which icons the subjects were exposed to. It seems this 'prior priming or exposure' effect applies to verbal cues too, like for example, when they were reminded of their holistic-thinking nature, the respondents would think more holistically as compared when there were not any verbal cue priming (Kuhnen et al., 2001; Kuhnen et al., 2002).

The implications of the above cautions are that to have an as accurate a probe into the 'true' cultural response is to approach the issues from the perspective of research design. For example, during data collection, one could ask both what the research subject would do and why,

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[6] It is to be noted that another caution on internal validity has been advanced in footnote 5.

and to do so in a timed-manner (as to create a semblance of time pressure environment). In addition, one could conduct the research in a neutral place (for example a garden), away from memorabilia or artifacts that may remind them of their cultural heritage, thereby priming their cultural responses. To latter point is especially pertinent in the case of local research subjects as my experience is that they have penchant to display Chinese calligraphy scripts and statues of Confucius in their offices.

Ethical Issues

I subscribe to the value that research should do no harm to the subjects and that my subjects are indeed willing participants in the project. I have no qualms in being transparent with my subjects with the aims, research questions and approaches in the analyses and dissemination of the research findings. My motivation in doing this is to engender the trust and buy-in of the research subjects in the investigation. In fact, I would be very willing to send them the research proposal and even the protocol of my interview questions so as to 'walk the talk' of transparency. To further 'protect' my research subjects, I would maintain confidentiality of the participants in the subsequent research analysis and dissemination through the use of labels such as Principal A. To ensure that the participants are willing participants, I would obtain and file up the expressed permission of the subject to participate in the research.

Socio-Political Issues

There are some key socio-political issues that could impede the progress of my research project. Chief among them are two concerning the access to local research subjects and the willingness of local research subjects to be interviewed on record for the investigation. As my research context is located in Singapore, I need to have permission from the Singapore Ministry of Education to gain access to the Principals who are employees of the Singapore Ministry of

Education. Even if I have the Ministry's permission, I would have difficulty in recruiting of

subjects as they are busy people who may not prioritise time for research in their overall

workload. Assuming that I could get help in accessing to School Leaders through "gatekeepers"

(Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 37), I cannot be certain that they would be willing to talk to me on

a personal subject as their decision making experiences. The subjects might not be comfortable

in sharing their 'true' experiences as shedding too much clarity might expose the Machiavellian

side of their decision-making. Finally, I might also not be able to have my local research

subjects being interviewed on record[7], which might compromise the quality and completeness of

the data analysis process.

As for my subjects in London, I would need to leverage on my IoE supervisor to recruit

interested research subjects. Given their more open culture to research and inquiry, my belief is

that these subjects should not have much reservation on speaking to me on a potentially sensitive

subject such as decision-making and also being interviewed on record. However, I have not

immersed my self in the English socio/cultural and political environ much, I have much to learn

about any socio-political challenges that might affect the design and conduct of my research

project in London.

Timeline of Research

While I have developed this essay around my EdD thesis, for this section on research

timeline, I would like to just focus on the time frame for completing the Institution-Focused

Study (IFS). As the "purpose of the IFS is to enable students to carry out a small-scale research

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[7] This scenario is plausible, as ased on a story that I have heard from a skilled researcher from Teachers College who came to Singapore to do a research on a cross-national study of accountability systems, none of his local interviewees, even academics, were not comfortable enough to go on record for the interviews.

study based upon … problems faced in an organization" (NIE, 2010, p. 30), I will focus on
completing RQ 1a for the IFS.

A workable timeline for the completing Research Questions 1a, together with the need to
accomplish any background task of preparation of the research instruments to be used (e.g. in-
basket of case studies of ill-structured situations requiring decision-making) is presented below:

Task	Time-Frame
Background Preparation	
Research on ill-structured situations requiring decision-making in Singapore and English contexts	June - Oct 2011 (Tie it together with the assignment of Module 3)
Development of case studies of ill-structured situations requiring decision-making, with a side task of development of the semi-structured interview protocol	Nov 2011 – April 2012 (Complete under the assignment of Module 4)
Research Question 1a	
Probing how Singaporean School Leaders make decisions and why they do so in the way they said they would	May 2012 – June 2012
Analysis and Interpretation of Similarities and Differences within Singaporean Responses	Jul – Sep 2012
Writing-up of IFS Report	Oct – Dec 2012

<u>Reflexivity</u>

From reading Creswell (2008) and Luttrell (2010), I have developed a working definition of reflexivity as the concern of the 'fingerprints' that the researcher has left on the site of the investigation and the subjects, as well as on the collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of data. As every researcher brings its values, assumptions and other cultural baggage with him to the research process, it is only to be expected that the researcher's presence in the field would cause even ripple-like effects on the subjects as well as the investigation itself.

In researching local subjects, my presence will influence their responses to my data collection. Being a small country, where every Principal literally knows every other Principal, my local subjects might be guarded in sharing their true responses with me as they are uncertain as to how they would be judged in my eyes, as we are all members of the same professional fraternity. This issue has been termed as the problematic nature of 'insider research' in this module. One approach to overcome this issue is to emphasise that their responses are meant only for research and that their accounts will be treated with the strictest confidentiality. In addition, I should be every mindful of how my tone and choice of words might come across to the local subjects when working with my local subjects e.g. not coming across a fellow principal colleague but rather as an researcher.

As cautioned by Ronan (1986), in which he advised that we would do well to take heed of our own cultural biases when we do research on inter-cultural matters. Even with my experience of having lived in America and England for four years of my life, which should make me more sensitive to cultural biases, I should still be ever mindful of how I see and interpret a culture that's foreign to me. Am I seeing it and interpreting it from my ethnic Chinese culture and assumptions?

A related problem occurs to me when I look at my own culture. I might be so familiar to my own cultural happenings that I miss the nuances altogether. The general approach to this issue is to develop fresh eyes by 'making the familiar unfamiliar'. With the ability to see anew, hopefully I could note new observations and patterns that I could have been blinded sided by if I am too familiar with my own cultural setting and the people within it.

Then, there is what I term as 'knowledge bias.' Because I have read quite a lot of the differences and similarities between Chinese and Anglo-American styles of thinking and processing of information and behaving, would I just be re-confirming the established knowledge when I am looking at the field data? Or, would I be doing justice to the field data with an unbiased analysis and interpretation? Would my 'strengths' in prior knowledge become a 'liability' for the research?

In my write-ups, I need spell out the steps that I have taken to minimize such cultural interferences. Failing which, I should at least to articulate these cultural biases so that the reader can make an independent critique of the validity and reliability of my data and findings.

Conclusion

I am excited with the opportunity to inquire and reflect into the research issues of my research problem through this assignment. This is especially meaningful for me as it has been about 10 years since I became aware of this problem – it's a "10-year research problem in the waiting." I look forward to the other modules and component of this programme that would guide me towards the completion of the investigation and yield research-based findings that find practical applications to the everyday life of administrators and leaders. I also look forward to deepening my connection with the richness of my ethnic heritage of being a Chinese

Singaporeans through the process of learning and investigation of the research area of inter-

cultural educational decision-making.

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