

< Article >

Cultural Diversity in Organizations, and its Antecedents and Consequences

Takashi Sakikawa

Abstract

In this paper, I examine and argue cultural diversity in organizations and its antecedents and consequences, based on theories on organizational culture. Cultural diversity in organizations concerns to what extent heterogeneous sub-cultures, which stem from within-organization as well as outside-organization bases, are dispersed in organizations. The greater cultural diversity that is driven by the market-oriented employment system is likely to affect organizational adaptability. Meanwhile, that could become a double-edged sword for organizational performance since it sometimes runs counter to the dominant culture and, as a result, can harm the organizational efficiency that is generated by a strong, single culture, or dominant culture.

Keywords: organizational culture, cultural diversity, organizational performance, employment systems

INTRODUCTION

I have had some opportunities in recent years to hear globally acclaimed CEOs speak or to be indirectly informed of the management philosophies and policies of those CEOs through interviews with managers at their corporations. I was impressed that they stressed diversity or heterogeneity while playing down conformity or homogeneity. For instance, A. G. Lafley, CEO at Procter & Gamble (P&G), a U.S. consumer-products company, spoke about the importance of diversity and how P&G is achieving diversity (Lafley, 2007). He said that around forty percent of the leaders at the corporation are from outside the U.S.; thirty-five of the top executives hail from a dozen countries, such as Tanzania and Portugal. Nearly forty percent of P&G managers are women, and one of those is president of P&G's business in Greater China. Furthermore, the CEO argued that P&G's diverse organizations, not just in terms of ethnicity and gender but also in career experiences, leadership styles, and thinking styles, are more capable of understanding consumers from all walks of life and that they are more capable of tapping the diversity of outside partners. Not just the U.S. companies and their CEOs but also Japan's corporations and their top managers stress diversity even though the number of Japanese companies that value diversity is far less than that of their U.S. counterparts. I found through my interview with a manager at Nissan, a Japanese automotive company that Carlos Ghosn, CEO at the company, prioritizes diversity as one of the managerial challenges, and, therefore, one of the principles the corporation holds is diversity. Nissan was on the verge of bankruptcy in the late 1990s. However, two years after the charismatic Carlos Ghosn took over the corporation in 1999, it regained competitiveness and emerged from near-bankruptcy, and finally posted a substantial profit of \$2.3 billion—that is how it is said that Nissan achieved a “V-shaped recovery.” One way that Ghosn invented to restore competitiveness and that contributed to the V-shaped recovery was the creation of “cross-functional teams” in which talented, young people attended to and solved problems from across different functions, such as marketing, procurement, manufacturing, planning, etc. Those people who got together in cross-functional teams were heterogeneous not only in terms of their job backgrounds but also in nationality. What is more, Nissan is achieving diversity by increasing the number of female managers, not just employing more female workers than before. I also had a chance to hear Okuda Hiroshi, the former CEO of Toyota, one of Nissan's rival Japanese car makers, mention that homogeneity or similarity is no longer the source of competitive strength, and therefore Toyota praises diversity while overcoming its negative consequences, e.g., the loss of social solidarity, with the corporation's employees around the world sharing its values or corporate culture.

Thus, corporate executives, journalists (e.g., Vendantam, 2007), and scholars (e.g., Arimura,

2007) are talking about diversity in organizations and workplaces. In this paper I focus on and examine cultural diversity in organizations. Even though there has already been work done on cultural diversity in organizations, this paper differs from previous work in several ways. First of all, in this paper I develop concepts and theories based on the literature on organizational culture. The prior work on cultural diversity in organizations assumes that demographical factors regarding organizational members, such as nationality and race, are equivalent to cultures, and does not take into consideration cultures that originated in factors other than demographics (e.g., Cox, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 2001). Based on the literature on organizational culture, I examine cultural diversity in organizations that has its roots not only in demographics but also in other factors. Second, even though the work on cultural diversity in organizations has examined cultural heterogeneity primarily in western corporations, above all U.S. enterprises (e.g., Cox, 1993), I examine and argue cultural diversity in organizations keeping Japanese corporations in mind. Third, in the case where I examine and argue cultural diversity in Japanese organizations, I inquire into cultural situations at shop-floor or operative as well as administrative organizations. Cultural diversity in Japanese organizations has usually been discussed, if not often, however, in those cases in which Japanese journalists and scholars assume cultural diversity in the organizational top tier, e.g., corporate headquarters or top managerial teams; they are interested in how top executives and managers are culturally different in terms of their nationality, gender, etc. Last, and more importantly, not only do I examine cultural diversity itself in organizations, but I also study its antecedents and consequences.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUB-CULTURES ¹

Organizational culture emerges and develops as organizational members cooperate. There are various definitions of that organizational phenomenon: meanings, interpretations, or frames of reference shared by organizational members; “a pattern of basic assumptions” that lies beneath, and affects, not just behaviors, but values in organizations. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that there is no consensus on the definition of organizational culture, but it would be permissible to say that organizational culture is an “invisible or intangible structure” while organizational structure is a visible or tangible structure. Then, how does organizational culture work? For instance, in interpreting or making sense of events or information in organizations, people are affected by organizational culture.

In the early 1980s when organizational or corporate culture emerged as a dominant theme in

¹ See Sakikawa (1998) for review of organizational culture.

management research, it was seen as a “strong culture” that is shared by all or most people in an organization, a “homogeneous culture,”² a “dominant culture,” or an “organization-wide culture.” That nomenclature indicates that organizational culture is a single culture, a monolithic phenomenon. It goes without saying that such a single, strong culture is shared by the majority of organizational members and expresses the organization’s core values.

There is wisdom that high performance is attributable to a strong culture. There are some reasons for that relation: organizational members are committed to organizational goals because personal goals can be identified with organizational ones in the context of a strong culture; a strong culture motivates people to work hard, e.g., because they like the culture of their corporations; people, in particular non-managerial employees, can manage themselves and work independently, even if there is no bureaucratic control, since they share the meanings and interpretations of work. From a standpoint of organizational performance, a strong culture or homogeneous culture is expected to affect *organizational efficiency*, the ratio of input to output. That is because (1) people work passionately and generate a high standard of productivity, (2) it takes less monitoring and overhead cost to run organizations by a strong culture than by bureaucracy, (3) a highly committed organization with a strong culture can maintain a low rate of labor turnover and absenteeism, and (4), accordingly, the organization can recoup investment in educating and developing people working there.

In addition to the “integration” or single culture perspective demonstrated above, there is another “differentiation” or multiple cultures perspective in building theories on organizational culture (Martin, 2002). To what extent organizational culture is shared by people in an organization differs depending on the organization, and the culture that is shared by a specific group of people in an organization is a sub-culture or organizational sub-culture.³ In measuring and testing organizational sub-cultures (Sakikawa, 1998), I created a measurement to capture to what extent they are dispersed in an organization and named it “diversity of organizational sub-cultures.” Some of the organizations have greater diversity of organizational sub-cultures, others less. By cultural diversity in organizations, as indicated in the title of this paper, I mean diversity of organizational sub-cultures. Organizations with a strong culture or homogeneous culture have less diversity of organizational sub-cultures whereas organizations with many, heterogeneous sub-cultures hold a greater level of organizationally sub-cultural diversity.

² Because a strong culture refuses to accept heterogeneity, it is co-existent, or symbiosizes, with a homogeneous culture, and I interchangeably use two terms in this paper.

³ A sub-culture is not an antonym of a “superior” culture. Rather, it is opposite to a dominant culture or organization-wide culture; thus, the culture of an administrative organization is a sub-culture from the perspective of an organization-wide culture.

The bases on which organizational sub-cultures are formed include organizational structure, technology, products, organizational layers, tenure, labor unions, etc. Those could be categorized as within-organization, and sub-cultures formed on those bases are unique to the organization and in that sense “organizational,” and they are literally organizational sub-cultures. On the other hand, some of the sub-cultures stem from outside organizations: the bases that influence the formation of those sub-cultures could be categorized as outside-organization. Those outside-organization bases include occupations, professions, gender, ages, education, nationality, races, religions, etc. (Martin, 2002). Those sub-cultures that are formed on outside-organization bases are shared among people not only in organizations but also across several organizations; in that sense, those sub-cultures are trans-organizational. For example, professional cultures are shared among professionals, specifically engineers, computer programmers, accountants, and lawyers across organizations. Thus, correctly, those sub-cultures stemming from outside organizations are not organizational sub-cultures but rather “(sub)cultures in organizations” (Martin, 2002; 164-165).

Sub-cultures cross, overlap, subsume, and nest inside each other in organizations. For example, the culture of the R&D department at a corporation, which is an organizational subculture, subsumes engineering culture, youth culture, union cultures shared among engineers, young people, and labor union members inside and outside the corporation. The R&D department is composed of several lower-level sections, and thus the cultures of the sections are nested within the larger level sub-culture, that is, the culture of the R&D department. Then, the R&D culture along with other department cultures is subsumed beneath, or nested inside, the corporate culture. It could be seen from different angles that, since youth culture and union culture in the R&D department are shared by people at other departments as well, e.g., manufacturing and sales, those sub-cultures cross and overlap other departmental cultures.

Sub-cultures in organizations are not just “objectively” delineated by organizational structure, organizational layer, gender, nationality, etc.; groups and boundaries between groups are “subjectively” or “socially” constructed in organizations, and, as a result, cultures are formed in those groups. For example, employees are distinguished at U.S. corporations in terms of white collar-workers or blue-collar workers; as a result, white-collars workers have a culture different from that of blue-collar workers at U.S. corporations. On the other hand, Japanese corporations have traditionally treated all employees including the rank-and-file workers equally; consequently, managers, staff members, and workers share organizational culture — that is how strong cultures are more likely to develop in Japanese than in U.S. corporations.

In a nutshell, there is not only homogenous or dominant culture but also various sub-cultures in organizations, which are seen as “a nexus where a variety of cultural influences come together within a boundary” (Martin, 1992: 111). Extending the view, cultural settings in organizations

could be regarded as a “nexus of sub-cultures.”

Organizational sub-cultures play roles in relation to a dominant culture (Martin, 1992). If sub-cultures support, complement, or enhance a dominant culture, they are called “enhancing sub-cultures.” Since members of enhancing sub-cultures assimilate into a dominant culture, the two kinds of cultures are rarely different in nature from each other. On the contrary, if sub-cultures run counter to values and beliefs shared and supported by the majority of people at an organization, i.e., the dominant culture, they are called “counter-cultures.” Naturally, those counter-cultures are different in character from the dominant culture. Some of the sub-cultures are neutral and neither support nor resist a dominant culture. From different angles, they might be indifferent to a dominant culture. Those sub-cultures are called “orthogonal sub-cultures.”

Because counter-cultures are opposite a dominant culture, they are likely to reduce the effect of a strong culture or homogeneous culture, that is, organizational efficiency. On the other hand, counter-cultures provide a counter-balance to a strong culture in which organizational members are blind to the environment around the organization and cannot change strategies; in other words, they are trapped into “strategic myopia.” Figuratively speaking, a strong culture sometimes swings the pendulum, that is, the organization, to the extreme pole; counter-cultures allow the pendulum to swing back to the opposite pole. In such a way, organizational sub-cultures such as counter-cultures are likely to affect *organizational adaptability*, a part of organizational performance; in other words, those sub-cultures allow organizations to adapt to the organizational environment and turn themselves around. That is the crucial effect of sub-cultures on organizations. It is expected that the greater the diversity of organizational sub-cultures is, the more likely organizational adaptability is to be achieved.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND EMPLOYMENT SYSTEMS

While the consequences or outcomes of cultural diversity in organizations have been earnestly argued, their antecedents or causes have not gotten so much attention, although it has been suggested that increased globalization, a changing labor market (e.g., a massive influx of immigrants into the labor market), legislation (e.g., affirmative action), etc. have impacted cultural diversity in organizations (Cox, 1993). From the perspective of management theorists and practitioners, it is important to examine the relation between cultural diversity and not those environmental factors, i.e., globalization, labor market, and laws, but rather managerial factors.

Almost three decades ago when the western managers had little knowledge of how the Japanese managed their companies, in his best-selling book *Theory Z* where he studied Japanese management and companies, Ouchi (1981) examined how employment systems involve

organizational culture. He asserted that J-type organizations with Japanese companies, and the Z-type organizations some of American companies, e.g., IBM and Hewlett-Packard at that time, possessed the organization-oriented employment system where a strong culture is likely to be formed. In these organizations, jobs for the employees are guaranteed not to be cut over the years — from the time of joining the company through arriving at retirement age — by the employer; then, in return for the job security, the employees commit their effort to the organization and its goals. Those employees whose jobs are guaranteed are evaluated, and climb the organizational ladders according to the length of service, or seniority; therefore, organizations dislike distinction among employees, and instead value egalitarianism. The employees do not only master skills specific to the organization where they are destined to commit their lives, but also they socialize values and beliefs of the organization; if they did not so, they would be ostracized by their colleagues at the workplace. Naturally, under the organization-oriented employment system, organizational culture permeates the workplace and is shared by a large number of organizational members. The organizational culture is a strong culture or homogeneous culture, which constitutes the competitive strength of the organization.

Traditionally, Japanese enterprises have utilized a seniority-system, life-time employment, job-rotation, on-the-job-training, etc. and still remain much more organization-oriented in their employment system than their U.S. counterparts. Yet, in recent years they have emulated management practices of U.S. companies, for example, instituting a performance-based pay policy and outsourcing the workforce due to pressure from investors and intense global competition or because of just a “fad” (Cappelli, 1999; Jacoby, 2005). As a result, it is said that they are going into the opposite end on the continuum of the employment system, market-oriented (Jacoby, 2005). Corporations that are run under the market-oriented employment system no longer have a “psychological contract” typical of traditional companies, an expectation implicit between employers and employees that, while employers guarantee jobs in return for contributions employees make to achieving organizational goals, employees are loyal to or committed to organizations as long as employers provide job security (Cappelli, 1999). In those corporations, the employers make little investment in educating and training people to gain skills necessary for doing jobs; rather, they prefer to outsource the workforce, e.g., to personnel agencies, since they can respond to fluctuations in product or service demand or they simply do not want to pay regular worker benefits including health insurance. The employees are evaluated, based not on seniority but rather on abilities or capabilities to achieve specific tasks; in addition, their capabilities and abilities are benchmarked against those outside the company or on the labor market. The employers cannot, or do not intend to, guarantee their employees’ jobs and future. Meanwhile, the employees do not intend to end their careers at a single corporation; they

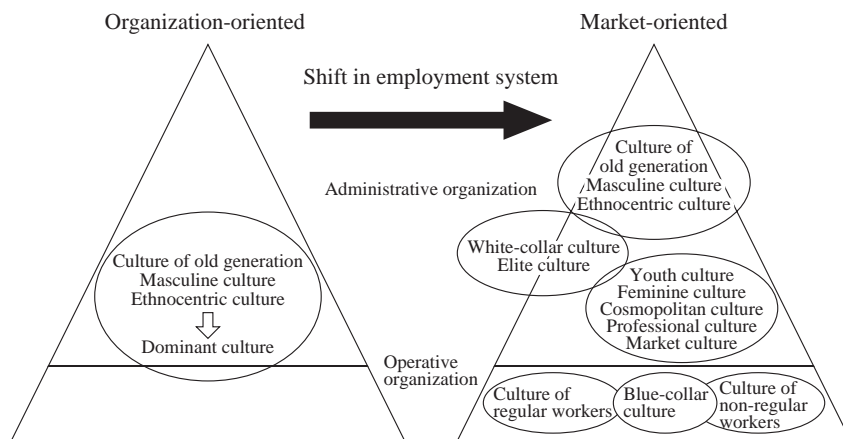
attempt to increase their value in the labor market, that is, “employability,” by honing skills by themselves and are ready to leave their corporations and jump into other ones that provide more attractive jobs. It is not a shared value or corporate culture but an explicit contract that unites people in those corporations under the market-oriented employment system. A strong culture is difficult to form under such an employment system.

Thus, people with various backgrounds come together at corporations run with the market-oriented employment system, but is it possible that various organizational sub-cultures emerge and develop at those companies? Personal values principally reflect ones of a group that a person belongs to (Cox, 1993), and there are several groups in organizations where the group members share the same cultural background. For those reasons, it is likely that cultural diversity in organizations is greater under the market-oriented employment system than under the organization-oriented.

I provide a hypothetical example to show what cultural situations will arise if an employment system is transformed from organization-oriented into market-oriented, though, in fact, this especially radical transformation is extremely difficult. I suppose that a corporation—here with a focus on the administrative organization—is run by the organization-oriented employment system: the managerial employees have spent years with that corporation since they joined it just after graduating from college; they have moved up the organizational ladders to the present managerial positions — only a handful of those people to executive suites — according to the length of service or seniority; and the majority of those managers are males of the same nationality. Then, I assume that those people are members of sub-cultures, such as “a culture of an old generation,” “masculine or male culture,” and “ethnocentric culture.” Those organizational sub-cultures are dominant in the corporation and a set of them represents the dominant culture (see Figure 1). Even if those managers and management teams working in that monolithic, homogeneous organizational culture attempted to formulate new strategies and institutions, they could not think of innovations or breakthroughs. If someone, e.g., a CEO who was headhunted and is not bound to the organizational culture at the hypothetical corporation, abandoned the organization-oriented and initiated the market-oriented employment system, and, as a result, more young people who have spent only three to five years with the corporation, more females, more foreigners, more job or company hoppers joined the administrative organization, then how would the cultural situations react to that change? Those newcomers would bring to the administrative organization new sub-cultures, such as “youth culture,” “feminine or female culture,” the “cosmopolitan culture” that foreigners with global views bring with them, and the “market culture” and “professional culture” that job hoppers bring with them. Consequently, the old-generation, masculine, and ethnocentric cultures would no longer constitute the dominant culture (see Figure

1). It is hypothesized that those managers and managerial teams with various cultural backgrounds—which would lead to greater cultural diversity—would propose or formulate more innovative strategies or institutions than those presented by managers when the organization-oriented employment system was adopted. That is because those managers hold various perspectives, values, ideas, and practices.

FIGURE 1
A Hypothetical Example: Transformation in Cultural Situations Accompanied by Shift in Employment System



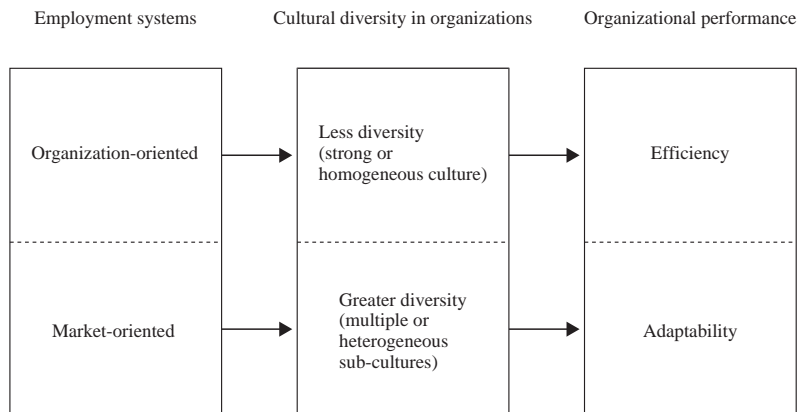
Meanwhile, a cultural chasm between the administrative organizations and the operating or work organizations where non-managerial or rank-and-file workers perform their tasks is more likely to take place or broaden and deepen under the market-oriented than the organization-oriented employment system. This is because a principal part of the market-oriented employment system is a pay-for-performance policy and the corporation that has abandoned the traditional organization-oriented employment system and adopted the market-oriented one utilizes meritocracy instead of seniority; naturally, those organizations do not allow egalitarianism. Back to the hypothetical example, from the perspectives of the rank-and-file workers, management is a bunch of “elites” and the elite culture is salient; thus, there is a cultural boundary between management and the rank-and-file workers. That is, managerial and non-managerial employees are not united by a single, strong culture; rather, while “white-collar culture” or “elite culture” becomes salient at the upper echelon of the organization, “blue-collar culture” takes place at the lower organizational layer (see Figure 1).

Changing focus to the lower organizational tier of the hypothetical corporation under the market-oriented employment system reveals that sub-cultures emerge even at operative or work organizations and these cultures could harm organizational efficiency, which is a very important performance indicator for work organizations. In corporations with the organization-oriented employment system, the culture of the operative organization is relatively homogeneous compared with that of the administrative organization. Traditionally, operative organizations, especially shop-floor organizations at manufacturing plants, hold cultural solidarity; for example, operators working on the assembly lines value teamwork, collectivism, unity, and harmony, and possess “line culture” for each assembly line (Sakikawa, 1998). Although the rank-and-file workers are proud of membership in their line culture, the difference among line cultures is a matter of degree and the whole plant where all of those workers operate is characterized by a strong, single culture. However, I have observed cultural boundaries or “walls” at front-line organizations through my field work that has been done over roughly five years at Japanese manufacturing plants (Sakikawa, 2006). Japanese manufacturers have outsourced the workforce to enable flexible or agile production or cut down on personnel cost, which indicates that those Japanese companies have shifted from the organization-oriented to the market-oriented employment system. As a result, at present, the majority of the rank-and-file workers at Japanese manufacturing plants are not regular workers but “contingent workers,” that is, temporary workers dispatched from personnel agencies or sub-contractors, part-time workers, etc. Although managers at Japanese manufacturing plants attempt to get those contingent or non-regular workers to understand a plant policy, manufacturing practices, etc., some of those workers refuse to accept them — which suggests that the culture of contingent or non-regular workers sometimes emerges at manufacturing plants. Managers at some of the Japanese manufacturing plants are attempting to reduce the distinction, including symbolic differences (e.g., uniform colors), between regular and non-regular workers and not to allow cultural groupings at shop-floor organizations. However, many cases in my field research indicate that contingent workers represent a cultural group and there is a cultural boundary between regular and non-regular workers, even if those workers could be grouped together by the so-called culture of blue-collar workers, like at typical U.S. companies (see Figure 1). I found through the field research that the cultural distinction was sometimes detrimental to team solidarity and morale, which caused reduced organizational efficiency.

THE CAUSAL RELATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper I have developed concepts and theories on cultural diversity in organizations. Now, by putting together arguments I have developed thus far, I present the relationship among cultural diversity in organizations, employment systems, and organizational performance, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Based on the causal relation, I discuss the implications of this paper.

FIGURE 2
The Relationship among Cultural Diversity, Employment Systems, and Organizational Performance



First of all, this paper provides a theoretical foundation to explain the linkage between human resource management (HRM) and performance by demonstrating that cultural diversity mediates between employment systems and organizational performance. In the study field of strategic human resource management (SHRM), scholars have untangled the relations between HRM and performance, however, they have not yet fully explained how organizational factors including behavior, structure, and process intervene in the HRM-performance linkage; thus, it is said that those relations still remain a black box (Becker & Huselid, 2006). In this paper, I provided a theoretical foundation to explain the HRM-performance linkage by using theories on organizational culture. That attempt would contribute not only to progress in research on SHRM, but also to the interaction between HRM research and organization studies.

Second, although some scholars have asserted that cultural diversity in organizations is an “asset” or a “source of competitive advantage” (Cox & Blake, 1991), this paper showed that it

is not always so, as indicated in Figure 2. Greater cultural diversity in organizations is likely to generate organizational adaptability as part of organizational performance in that heterogeneous sub-cultures can check or contain a too-strong culture, or an arrogant dominant culture that causes organizational inability to change strategies and strategic myopia. Meanwhile, organizational sub-cultures like counter-cultures are likely to decrease organizational efficiency since they run counter to, and harm, a dominant culture. Organizational diversity in organizations, especially at greater levels, could be “the double-edged sword” for organizational performance.⁴

Third, and finally, the causal relation demonstrated in Figure 2 suggests that, since Japanese corporations are more organization-oriented in their employment system than are U.S. firms, cultural diversity in Japanese organizations is less than in U.S. counterparts.

I close this paper mentioning my future work. This paper demonstrates the relationship between cultural diversity in organizations, employment systems, and organizational performance and provides its implications. Nevertheless, the causal relation is general and I will need to clarify how specific sub-cultures, e.g., market culture and professional culture, are associated with organizational adaptability. I also need to think of organizational outcomes other than organizational efficiency and adaptability, e.g., “organizational survival,” and, furthermore, even financial outcomes such as profitability and stock prices, and to examine whether and how much cultural diversity is associated with those outcomes. What is more, I will need to test the relations among cultural diversity, employment systems, and organizational performance by performing qualitative or quantitative analysis, based on soft or hard evidence collected from Japanese companies and U.S. firms where it is expected that cultural diversity is greater, and the employment system is more market-oriented, compared with those of Japanese corporations.⁵ In selecting and using quantitative methods, e.g., regression analysis, I will need to analyze by including variables other than employment system, e.g., leadership style, organizational culture per se (e.g., culture that allows diversity), in the models in order to examine whether and how much those variables in addition to employment system affect cultural diversity in organizations.

⁴ Organizations would be able to adopt an eclectic mix of cultural diversity situations, that is, greater and less diversity, or that of employment systems, that is, organization-oriented and market-oriented. However, I do not take into consideration such eclecticism since I think that it would harm rather than improve organizational performance.

⁵ I attempted to test the relation demonstrated in this paper by using secondary data, e.g., the number of female managers and foreign workers appearing on published books. I confirmed that the market-oriented employment system is associated with greater cultural diversity, which in turn leads to organizational adaptability, even if the strength of those relations is moderate. However, I will need to develop those analyses by collecting and using original data in the future.

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