Hypotheses about Japan

Culture, Control, and Commitment. A Study of Work Organization and Work Attitudes in the United States and Japan. JAMES R. LINCOLN and ARNE L. KALLEBERG. With the collaboration of Mitsuyo Hanada and Kerry McBride. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990. xii, 291 pp. $44.50.

In the early postwar period, the proponents of the modernization theory argued that late-developing countries, such as Japan, are likely to become more like the United States or Western Europe. This view was challenged in the early 1970s by Ronald Dore, who asserted that, if convergence was to occur, it would happen on terms defined by the latecomers; in other words, the rest of the developing world is expected to become more like Japan. Japanese firms, described as commitment-maximizing organizations, are seen as the wave of the future.

The focus of this book is to test in a fairly rigorous manner a number of hypotheses derived from Dore's "welfare corporatism" theory within Japanese and U.S. manufacturing plants. The core hypotheses concerning how specific organizational factors impact on work attitudes are contrasted with predictions drawn from "bureaucratic-alienation" models, which often point to an opposite causal direction. As an alternative, the impact of culture as an explanatory variable is also considered.

The authors attempt to make their observations at several levels. In the beginning chapters, they examine the level of work commitment and job satisfaction among U.S. and Japanese workers. Then they proceed to analyze how commitment and satisfaction are influenced by job attributes, work values, and other employee-related factors. Finally, they look at the impact of the plant organizational structures and processes. They not only compare absolute levels of attitudes toward work in the two countries, they also examine the degree to which these attitudes evolve in a similar fashion.

On the first point, Lincoln and Kalleberg find that among Japanese workers job satisfaction is lower but work commitment higher in comparison to workers in U.S. factories. The former finding is not as surprising as it may look to a casual reader of tomes extolling the virtues of Japanese management. It confirms observations made by other scholars, although this time using the heavy guns of multivariate regression. The contrast between the image of "happy" Japanese workers and the observed reality is explained as a function of unfulfilled expectations; namely, Japanese workers expect more from their jobs, thus a similar organizational context results in lower job satisfaction in comparison to the United States.

To get to the conclusion that job commitment is higher in Japan, the authors had to apply all their ingenuity and statistical prowess. Short of reanalyzing the whole survey, readers have no choice but to accept their argument. After all, it fits in with common perceptions of the employment environment in Japan. Yet some may remain unconvinced, in particular as the existence of the "commitment gap"—without the caveats carefully laid out during the analysis—becomes the central evidence for the desirability of a welfare corporatist organization through the remainder of the book.

Following the core analysis, Lincoln and Kalleberg move on to analyze relations among principal job attributes in Japanese and U.S. plants, such as job position and task, job rewards, social bonds at work, and their effect on organizational commitment and job satisfaction. A key finding here is that differences across levels of the management hierarchy in work attitudes and in job quality and rewards are smaller in Japan than in the United States. The analysis also illustrates the high status of Japanese first-level supervisors relative to their counterparts in the United States. This fact may have numerous implications for the work climate: authority, decision-making style, career aspirations can all be affected. The book's arguments regarding the factors influencing high commitment would probably be even more compelling had the authors pursued this line of inquiry in greater detail.

Another interesting result is presented in the chapter dealing with differences in work values. Americans, more than Japanese, found the "firm as a family" an attractive idea. This illustrates well how misleading it could have been to accept some cultural stereotypes at their face value. The data also show a consistent effect of age in the Japanese sample, leading the authors to predict, as many have before them, an upcoming social change. Though they may be right, it needs to be pointed out that this conclusion cannot be inferred from their data. Here Lincoln and Kalleberg make a mistake common to many observers of the Japanese social scene, confusing value differences between age-graded cohorts of employees with value differences among same-age cohorts over time. To get at this issue would, of course, require a different kind of survey methodology.

A similar problematic generalization appears in a number of points in the book where the authors refer to seniority-based promotions in Japanese firms. In any hierarchical organization where the number of positions at the top is smaller than those at the bottom, seniority cannot be a sufficient selection tool. Firms in Japan are no exception. Though promotions may come more slowly than elsewhere and a prescribed time-in-the-grade is often essential before becoming eligible for another move up, among the pool of eligible candidates the promotion decision is based on merit and achievement. In internal labor markets characterized by long career ladders, this implies a high level of individual competition. What is fascinating about companies in Japan is how this intense competition can be subsumed in a generally cooperative work atmosphere.

Nevertheless, these omissions do not detract much from the skillfully woven argument about the central conclusion of the book: in general, organizational variables have mostly a similar impact on job satisfaction and commitment in Japan and in the United States. Though the specific organizing modes are often different between the two countries, those in Japan are more in line with those described in organizational literature as associated with "advanced" technologies; thus the argument that the Japanese way of industrial organization will eventually prevail.

Although others may find it difficult to replicate the complex methodology applied by Lincoln and Kalleberg, no doubt many will try to take a shot at this provocative position. In this sense, their book is a well-deserved success: it provides a "definite" treatment of one important topic in cross-cultural comparison, while it raises new important questions that comparative social science must address.

VLADIMIR PUCIK
School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Coming in two weeks: *Science*'s annual Book Issue, featuring a broad sampling of current books for generalists, specialists, or both.