

In management practice, West isn't always best

There is a problematic absence of non-Western voices in management research.



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From data points to management practices, the Western world may be missing out on important insights from non-Western countries such as Brazil, China, India and [South Africa](#).

Management is a global phenomenon, yet the body of management knowledge doesn't always reflect that. Different cultures may have different — and equally interesting — contributions to the creation of successful organizations. After all, concepts such as mindfulness and employee well-being, which increasingly feature in Western management, owe much to Buddhism.

Is there more to be learned from other cultures? And rather than simply looking to test or challenge the limits of Western management, could theories from other cultures become, if not new reference points, then at least other valid perspectives to expand our collective understanding?

One problem with achieving this vision is that academic research itself is narrowly focused on the Western world. This was the conclusion drawn by IESE's [Yuliya Snihur](#) and coauthors in their paper, "[Embracing non-Western contexts in management scholarship](#)."

For the *Journal of Management Studies*, the authors analyzed the types of research featured in *JMS* between 2012 and 2023. They found that only 12% came from non-Western contexts; for some years, it was as low as 3%.

A narrow dataset

Data from countries such as Brazil, India, Japan or Nigeria is underrepresented in academic literature. Despite these countries' increasingly central role in the global economy, there is a serious lack of research into the cultural, political, regulatory and ethical contexts needed to succeed in business in these countries.

During the decade studied, only 3.7% of the studies published in *JMS* were carried out in Brazil, 7.48% in India, 2.8% in South Africa and 0% in Nigeria.

One reason for this is the subconscious prejudice that data from these regions can only ever reveal *local* insights. And when data from these countries *is* collected and analyzed, it is often only being used to test how Western theories work in those contexts.

This contrasts with the unspoken expectation that Western data can illicit *universal* insights. As such, researchers from non-Western countries are reluctant to use their own local data, for fear their results will be taken less seriously by top journals, the vast majority of which are based in Western countries.

But there is little to no reason to assume that non-Western data is inferior to Western data when it comes to making claims about management and organizations. Indeed, relying solely on Western data can be highly problematic, since it can lead to inaccurate and acontextual assessments.

The authors propose three ways to address this:

1. By examining how non-Western phenomena and ideas influence the West.
2. By using theories from non-Western contexts to try to explain global management.
3. By going beyond the [West vs. non-West dichotomy](#) altogether.

The authors argue that future research should aim to tease out contextual factors that could influence management, such as economic strength, degrees of inequality, human rights, historical background, religion, values, forms of governance and cultural differences in ethical leadership, based on unique and deeply ingrained cultural traditions. Focusing on these societal dimensions would provide legitimacy to any research, regardless of the origin of the data used.

Theories from the East

Despite comparatively little research, some theories have made it through to Western audiences, partly due to the emergence of globally active multinational corporations not headquartered in the West, and movements of people through migration or expatriation.

The following theories show the potential of non-Western influence:

- **Kaizen.** Originating from Japan, the Kaizen method is a humanized approach to increasing worker productivity, from the CEO to assembly line workers. It is used in purchasing, logistics and supply-chain processes, emphasizing constant organizational improvement, learning and development.
- **Toyota's 5 Whys.** This quality improvement tool has been adopted in multiple sectors, from healthcare to manufacturing. It involves repeating the question “why” five times, each time building on the last response until the root cause of a problem is revealed. It is considered a building block of Six Sigma and lean operations, and an inspiration for just-in-time manufacturing.
- **Paradox Theory.** Inspired by Taoism, Paradox Theory explores how most phenomena are characterized by competing and opposing forces. Concepts such as “paradoxical leadership” and “paradox mindset” have evolved from this theory as a

means of managing and embracing the contradictory duality of life.

- **Mindfulness.** Derived from Hindu and Buddhist traditions and Tibetan meditation practices, [mindfulness](#) has been found to reduce stress and promote employee well-being, resulting in lower absenteeism and burnout. It is increasingly popular in corporate training and has been adopted by many large corporations, with Google, Apple, Procter & Gamble and even the U.S. Army offering mindfulness coaching.

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