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A Grounded Theory Approach to Decision Making Processes
of Japanese Multinational Corporations in the US

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand how Japanese Multinational Corporations (MNCs) make organizational decisions in the United States (US). For this purpose, a grounded theory approach conceptualized by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was employed using a sample of 8 Japanese MNCs operating in the US. Semi-structural interviews with a total of 20 managers, 10 Americans and 10 Japanese, were conducted for data collection. Two decision-making tactics emerged from the analysis of interviews through the grounded theoretical model. Five propositions were generated, illustrating the characteristics of decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs in the US. Implications for future studies will be addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Japanese multinationals have increasingly established transplant operations in the US since the 1980s (Liker, Fruin, and Adler, 1999). They have challenged American dominant manufacturing industries in the form of transplant operations. Many researchers have paid attention to Japanese management systems such as: human resource management, organizational design, management decision-making, and industry and supplier relations in sustaining shop floor production systems (Liker, Furin, and Adler, 1999; Suzuki, 1992). As a typical Japanese management system, the shop floor management or the just-in-time production system seems to be able to fit itself into overseas Japanese MNCs. They perform well for both the improvement of product quality and the enhancement of efficient productivity in a manufacturing system.

However, it is often reported in Japanese business literature that Japanese decision-making processes adapt themselves into Japanese MNCs in an ineffective manner and reduce the morale of non-Japanese managers who play a crucial role in organizational performance (Pucik, 1994; Hayashi, 1999; Yoshihara, Hayashi, and Yasumoto, 1998). Whereas the Japanese decision-making process is still widely exercised in overseas Japanese MNCs (Sumihara, 1993), it is the most complex to non-Japanese organizational members (Yoshino, 1975; Harvany and Pucik, 1981). Additionally, it is difficult for Japanese expatriates to logically explain to their local counterparts about the mechanism of the Japanese decision making process used in their Japanese MNCs (Hayashi, 1999; Yoshihara, Hayashi, and Yasumoto, 1998). The execution of the decision-processes, thereby, results in frustrating and discouraging

non-Japanese management because the local management does not effectively participate in the organizational decision-making system (Bartlett and Yoshihara, 1992; Hayashi, 1999; Sumihara, 1993; Pucik, 1994).

Although the *ringi* system, a traditional business practice in Japanese firms, is conceived as a primary decision practice in the overseas Japanese MNCs (Sumihara, 1993), the different forms of decision-making strategies were presented in the area of Japanese business management (see, Yoshihara, Hayashi & Yasumuro, 1998). Under these circumstances, there are two inquiries about (1) whether the *ringi* system is still used in Japanese MNCs and (2) what kind of decision-making process is actually used in there. In overall, the present study aims to understand how Japanese MNCs operating in the US make decisions as a current form of Japanese business practice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Past Findings of the Decision Processes of Japanese MNCs Abroad

Several previous studies presented the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs in the US. For example, Sumihara's ethnography study (1993) in a large electronic company of a Japanese MNC explicates a Japanese decision-making process as a consensus building system in the entire organization. This decision process discussed in his study is better known as the *ringi* system, which is a traditional Japanese decision-making process. Some researchers also indicate that Japanese subsidiaries in the US make their decisions by utilizing the *ringi* system (Harvany and Pucik, 1981; Yoshino, 1975; Maguire and Pascale, 1978; Negandhi and Baliga, 1981). According to Nakane (1970), the *ringi* system serves to pull up opinions of lower level managers into a top management decision: "Superiors do not force their ideas on

juniors; instead, juniors spontaneously lay their opinions before their superiors and have them adopted” (p. 65). It is, however, argued that it is not really adequate to call the *ringi* system a bottom-up one (Drucker, 1971), because it is a management decision method and does not reach down to the shop floor level (Abeggelen, 1973; Yoshino, 1968). Sumihara (1993) discusses that the *ringi* system prevails at almost all overseas Japanese subsidiaries.

While the *ringi* system is regarded as a major decision practice over many Japanese MNCs abroad, there are different perspectives about how Japanese MNCs make decisions in overseas operations. Yoshihara, Hayashi and Yasumuro (1998) illustrate that most Japanese subsidiaries broadly modify a Japanese decision-making process based on the *ringi* system. It is essential to understand that any form of its modification contains the encouragement of participative management (Yoshihara, Hayashi, & Yasumuro, 1998). Their argument is that the nature of the *ringi* system, a consensus making process, lies in Japanese MNCs but that the *ringi* system itself is not employed in every Japanese subsidiary in the US. Instead, it is noted in their study that numerous meetings serve to generate organizational consensus in Japanese MNCs. In fact, it is reported that New United Motor Manufacturing (NUMMI), though it is a joint-venture between GM and Toyota, practices meetings as a means of consensus making and that this practice is regarded as a crucial factor to sustain successful business (Wilms, Hardcastle, & Zell, 1994; Suzuki, 1992).

There is another view regarding decision-making processes of overseas Japanese MNCs. Before Nissan Motor Manufacturing was taken over by a French automobile firm, it had been operated by a Japanese MNC. The first CEO of Nissan Motor Manufacturing USA, who is an American, was given considerable authority over

operational issues as a final decision-maker (Suzuki, 1992). This statement seems to suggest that the decision-making process depends on who dominantly operates the Japanese MNCs as top management. Previous research suggests that there is a possibility that Japanese MNCs may utilize different decision-making processes other than the *ringi* system under different organizational environments. It would be reasonable to infer that the *ringi* system may not be only a decision-making process and other forms of decision-making processes may exist in Japanese MNCs abroad.

The *Ringi* System

Before discussing the methodology of this qualitative study, it seems useful to illustrate the *ringi* system of a traditional Japanese decision-making process. *Ringi* is to request decision from a lower status to a higher status manager (Yamada, 1985; Sumihara, 1993). Typically, it starts three or four levels down from the top executive where a manager wants to initiate some process, product or activity (Heller, Drenth, Koopman and Rus, 1988). In *ringi* system, a low-status manager usually prepares the formal written form of request known as the *ringi-sho* describing the organizational issue and proposing its solution. The *ringi-sho* is circulated to all levels of management directly and indirectly involved in the issue, from bottom to the president. Each manager affixes his or her seal, stamp, or signature as agreement on the request.

If the issue is important enough to influence other departments, the manager makes informal face-to-face contacts with the managers of other departments for consultation, explanation, or persuasion. This process is called *nemawashi*. *Nemawashi* is usually practiced among managers at an equal hierarchical level. After the consensus among the same level managers has been reached, the initial manager takes the *ringi*

issue to his or her boss. The boss then examines the issue by informally contacting people at his or her own hierarchical level. When consensus of all relevant managers has been reached, the top executives including the president have a formal meeting and officially decide to approve the *ringi* proposal. This is the *ringi* system. The *ringi* system accompanying the *nemawashi* process is used to coordinate different opinions for organizational consensus.

METHODS

The primary research method of this study is a qualitative approach using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which is suited to discover a theory that relates to a particular situation (Creswell, 1998). The grounded theory is a qualitative research method designed to help the analysis of data and the construction of a theoretical model. The methods used involved (a) developing codes, concepts and categories inductively rather than imposing predetermined classifications on the data (Glaser, 1978) and (b) analyzing stories and discussions based on participants' experiences.

Research Participants

The unit of analysis of the present study is the organization. Examined organizations were 8 Japanese MNCs within which 20 managers participated for this study. Of 8 Japanese MNCs, 6 MNCs that had been taken over by Japanese firms were located in Cleveland and 2 MNCs founded by their Japanese parent firms were near Columbus. All Japanese MNCs were manufactures: 5 MNCs in the automobile parts industry, 2 MNCs in the heavy equipment industry, and the last one in the electric

industry. Seven MNCs had run their business with Japanese ownership since the late 80s or the early 90s, but one MNC started its business in 1976. The number of employees ranged from approximately one hundred to one thousand. The presidents of all 8 Japanese MNCs were Japanese. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of research participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Coded Japanese MNCs	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Location	Columbus	Cleveland	Cleveland	Cleveland	Columbus	Cleveland	Cleveland	Cleveland
Industry	Automobile	Heavy Equip.	Automobile	Automobile	Automobile	Heavy Equip	Electric	Automobile
Established years	1990s	1980s	1980s	1970s	1990s	1980s	1980s	1990s
New (N) or taken over (T)	N	T	T	T	N	T	T	T
No. of employees	471	100	148	1080	988	189	147	200
No. of Japanese expatriates	7	5	5	24	12	5	5	11
No. of interviewees	4	4	2	3	3	1	1	2
Japanese interviewees	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
	President VP	President	President	President MGR	President	President	CEO	President
American interviewees	2	3	1	1	2	0	0	1
	Director MGR	VP VP MGR	MGR	Director	MGR MGR			MGR

For the analysis of decision-making processes of 8 Japanese MNCs, a face-to-face interview was carried out with 20 managers. The years of participants' experiences in the Japanese MNCs ranged from one year to sixteen years. Ten participants were Japanese who had been transferred as expatriates from their headquarters: 8 Japanese worked as the president, one was a vice president, and the last one was a middle ranked manager. Nine Japanese managers had engaged themselves in corporate management as the highest-ranking officer for at least one year. The longest term of service in this position was a five-year period. All Japanese participants were men.

American participants were more diverse than Japanese ones in terms of their duties: 5 Americans worked as top management, 3 Americans were middle-ranked

managers, and one American was a low-status manager. One participant, though she was Japanese, was classified as an American participant in this study because she had been hired as a local employee to assist the president extensively. Thus, American participants were 10 in total. All 10 American managers had worked in American firms for at least two years, so they were able to compare American firms with Japanese firms. Three American managers directly reported to American bosses and 7 American managers were controlled by Japanese bosses. Two American participants were women. English was regarded as the official language in the workplace. When Americans and Japanese discussed in a group setting, they sometimes encountered a communication problem. For this reason, one Japanese MNC had hired a professional translator. Nine American managers could not speak Japanese, but most American managers felt that Japanese communication ability was unnecessary in their Japanese MNCs.

Research Procedures

Contacts with Japanese MNCs

Two directories were utilized for sampling for this research. The “Directory of Japanese-affiliated Companies in the USA & Canada: 1999” (JETRO, 1998) was a primary source and the “Dun & Bradstreet Million Dollar Directory 1999” (Dun & Bradstreet, 1998) was a complementary source. Three steps were taken for the selection of research participants: (1) selection of Japanese MNCs, (2) selection of Japanese participants, and (3) selection of American participants.

As the first step, a large number of firms listed in the two directories had to be funneled to choose organizational subjects. Three conditions of Japanese MNCs were considered for the selection of the subjects: location, the number of employees, and the

number of Japanese expatriates. Accessibility was the first condition; thus, Japanese MNCs locating in Cleveland or Columbus areas were initially examined. The number of employees appeared to affect decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs, but there was little literature describing the impact of this variable upon decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. Because small companies tend to be directly ordered and controlled by one person, whose control system is regarded as a simple control (Barker, 1993), it was determined that the number of employees should be more than one hundred to avoid simple control in Japanese MNCs.

The number of expatriates as well as their duties also seemed to influence decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. Yoshihara, Hayashi, and Yasumuro (1998) discuss that the establishment of a Japanese management system in overseas Japanese MNCs depend on the transfer of management resources from their parent firms. Yoshihara (1996) reports in his research that the average number of Japanese management is five per each Japanese MNC. For this reason, it was determined to select Japanese MNCs holding the number of Japanese expatriates that should be more than five. Forty-three Japanese MNCs from the two directories matched all three conditions of location, the number of employees, and the number of expatriates. Of 43 Japanese MNCs, 8 MNCs became organizational subjects through the selection of Japanese participants for a face-to-face interview.

Secondly, telephone inquiries for an appointment for an interview were conducted to Japanese expatriates working in the Japanese MNCs. The two directories provided the name of Japanese expatriates. Because those who were registered in the directories were usually engaged in the top-level management, most Japanese participants who accepted an interview are presidents. During the telephone inquiry, the

purpose of interviews was initially explained to the Japanese expatriates in Japanese and included decision-making processes, Japanese expatriates' roles, and management differences between a Japanese MNC in the US and its parent in Japan. Interested Japanese expatriates gave me the opportunity to make an appointment for interviews. The telephone inquiry continued until completion of scheduling interviews for 10 Japanese managers. Of the 12 Japanese expatriates contacted on the phone, 10 Japanese accepted interviews and became participants for this study.

As the third step, 4 Japanese participants introduced a total of 8 American managers and set up different times for their interviews. In the selection process of the 8 American participants, the 4 Japanese managers responded to my request that American participants be engaged in high or middle management, having at least one year of experience in their Japanese firms. A total of 10 American managers were representatives of 6 Japanese MNCs while 10 Japanese managers were representatives of 8 Japanese MNCs.

Confidentiality was discussed at the beginning of the interview to avoid a potential threat to participants or their firms. Except for 2 interviews, the interviews were performed individually in a meeting room that was assigned for this study. Most of the contents of interviews were recorded by a micro tape recorder with an emphasis on confidentiality when participants allowed me to use it. Since one Japanese manager felt uncomfortable about using a tape recorder and actually did not permit me to utilize one for his interview, field notes were taken during the interview. As a result, 19 interviews were recorded by a tape recorder and one interview was written down in a notebook.

Interviews for Data Sources

Japanese participants were interviewed in Japanese while American participants were interviewed in English. Each of the 20 managers had a 20 to 90-minute, open-ended interview, during which one open-ended question was primarily asked in order to investigate the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. The question refers to the one about how decisions are made in your firm based on your own experiences.

Research participants spent their time answering the question sufficiently. But, 3 American managers were too busy with their jobs during their interviews; in fact, other organizational members sometimes intervened during 2 American managers' interviews. For this reason, these 2 managers seemed to be unable to concentrate on their interviews that resulted in a 20-minute short interview. The other 18 participants were relatively collaborative with this study. The interview was also done only once to all managers within a limited timeframe and no follow-up interview was executed to explore the initial interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consisted of approximate 24 hours of interviews: 15 hours of Japanese interviews and 9 hours of American interviews, within which 20 hours of interviews were recorded and documented. All of the audiotapes in English were transcribed by a professional and those in Japanese were done by the author. If necessary, parts of Japanese transcriptions were translated into English in order to present the data as results for this study. The data documented consists of 304 pages of transcriptions: 162 pages of Japanese interviews and 142 pages of American interviews.

The analytic process was dependent upon the approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This process was based on absorption into the data, repeated coding, and comparisons, characterizing the grounded theory approach. The coding technique presented by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) was also utilized to analyze the data.

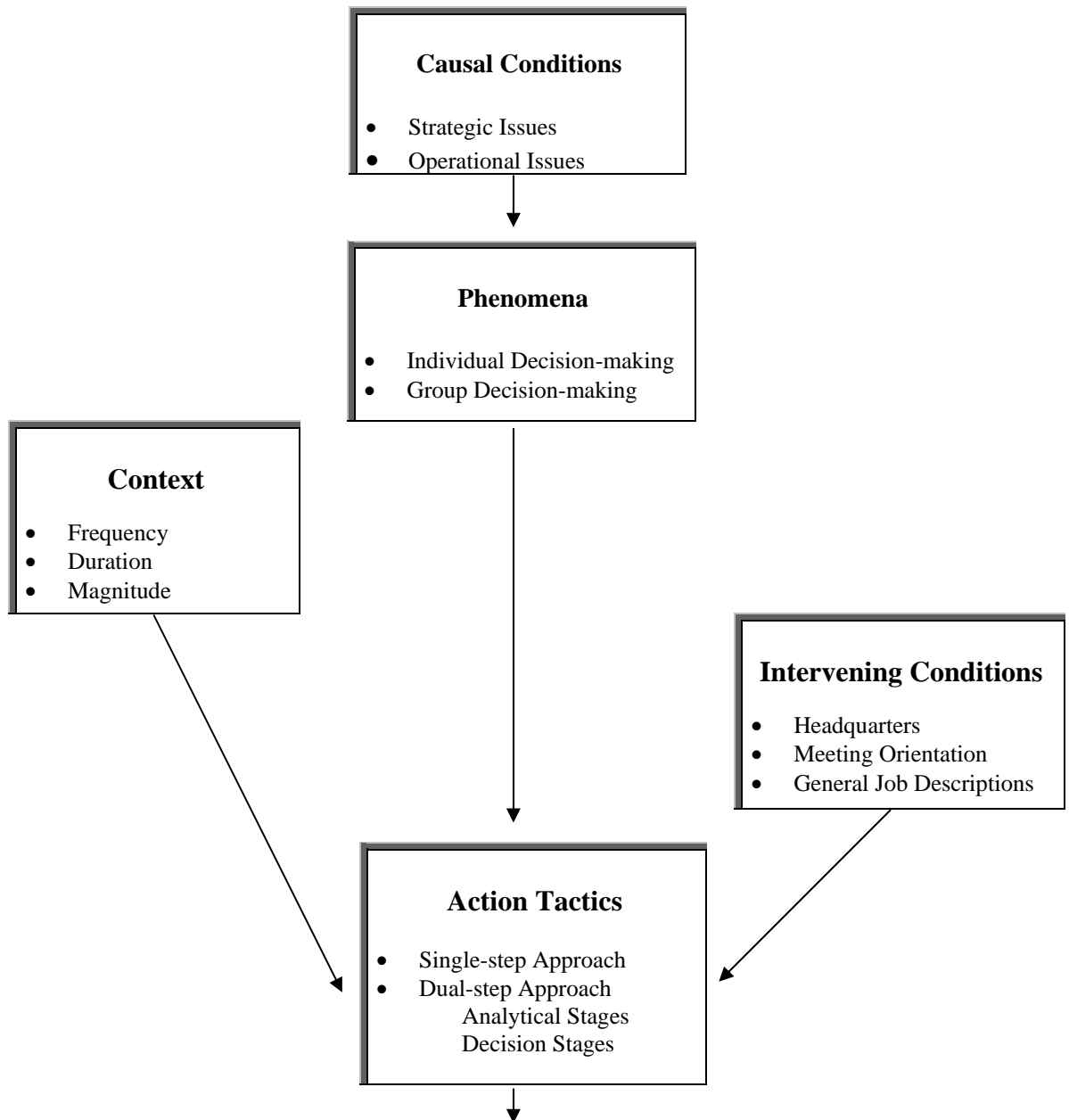
Analysis started with open coding, which is the examination of text composed of individual words, phrases, and sentences. Strauss and Corbin (1990) illustrated open coding as that which “fractures the data and allows one to identify some categories, their properties and dimensional locations” (p. 97). The language of the participants led to the development of codes, concepts and categories. These codes and categories were systematically compared and contrasted, yielding inclusive categories.

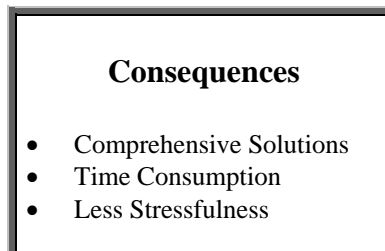
Open coding was followed by axial coding, which puts data “back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 97). From this process, categories emerged and were allocated in a framework of grounded theory model. Finally, selective coding ensued after axial coding. Selective coding was the integrative process of “selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 116). Codes and categories were compared and contrasted until analysis produced no new codes or categories. This process was also continued until all of the data were accounted for in the core categories of the grounded theory model.

RESULTS

The grounded theory model for decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs, evolving from Strauss and Corbin's (1990) framework, was developed from the present investigation. This model was presented as Figure 1.

Figure 1. Grounded theory model conceptualized by Strauss and Corbin (1990).





Causal Conditions of Organizational Issues

Causal conditions refer to “the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 100). Causal conditions emerged from the data, which led to decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs. These causal conditions referred to two organizational issues described by participants in Japanese MNCs: (1) strategic issues and (2) operational issues.

Strategic Issues

Strategic issues were associated with “a business plan,” “an investment plan,” or “a mid-term plan.” The Japanese president of A Company spoke of a causal condition bringing about decision-making processes regarding a business plan: “I meet the management executives face-to-face on April, two months before the start of a new fiscal year. This is an event. Then I order them to make a business plan.” In his statement, a business plan was identified as the causal condition that gave rise to the phenomenon that this MNC had to manage. The Japanese president of E Company also showed an organizational issue as a casual condition: “We have to make a decision of important policy and goals, that is a business plan, in a yearly basis, and a large amount of investment plan, too.” The Japanese president of D Company talked about other types of organizational plans as casual conditions: “In addition to an annual business

plan, we make an investment plan and a mid-term plan. An investment plan has three levels, and..." From these descriptions, "business plans," "investment plans," or "mid-term plans" created a category of strategic issues that cause decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs.

Operational Issues

The second causal condition was "operational issues," which were related to any organizational issues other than strategic issues. The Japanese president of A Company described an operational issue:

Because the Assembly Department did not check a part number clearly for the Indonesia customer, it produced all left-handle car seats and shipped them to Indonesia. It was extreme emergency. A plant manager and a control manager came to me. We had to make a decision to solve this problem urgently.

The organizational issue was identified, causing a decision-making process in the Japanese MNC urgently. The American production control manager of E Company described some organizational problems: "There is a problem with the machine on the floor, or a problem in just the way a procedure's being done. And, we will have to deal with it and solve it." Organizational issues that would cause decision-making processes ranged over several areas. The American plant manager of A Company suggested the scope of organizational issues that could lead to decision-making processes:

Our morning meetings, we address...all departments address their issues for the day, their problems from the day before, and ... it's our biggest meeting...and then, our morning meetings are very specific to such things (issues) as an SQCDM situation...safety, quality, cost, delivery, management.

All these issues above mentioned were different from strategic issues like business plans; therefore, in contrast to strategic issues, these types of organizational issues were categorized as “operational issues.” These two organizational issues as casual conditions brought about the occurrence of decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs.

Phenomena Resulting from Organizational Issues

In the grounded theory model, casual conditions lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon. A phenomenon is defined as “the central idea, event, happening, incident about which a set of actions or interactions are directed at managing, handling, or to which the set of actions is related” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96). This section focused on what were central phenomena that had to be handled in Japanese MNCs. Strategic issues or operational issues as causal conditions resulted in two central phenomena as reported by participants: (1) individual decision-making and (2) group decision-making. Individual decision-making referred to the phenomenon that individual organizational members made decisions with ones’ own judgement for dealing with organizational issues. Group decision-making concerned the other phenomenon that organizational members made decisions with meetings.

Individual Decision-Making

Individual decision-making was identified as a phenomenon when organizational members faced some operational issues. The American vice president of production of B Company experienced a situation with his subordinate:

I had a meeting with the staff, and the one guy had some question. It was fairly a trivial matter. And, he said, 'what should I do about this?' And, I said, 'you're the manager, you do it. You decide'.

The American vice president ordered his subordinate to make a decision by himself. The American production control manager of E Company explained about the phenomenon that he could make a decision individually: "Um...depending on...again, depending on the type of problem, if it's not so critical a problem, I will make decision." These two stories showed that small operational issues gave rise to the phenomenon that individual decision-making would emerge in Japanese MNCs. The Japanese middle manager of D Company also pointed out that there was the phenomenon of individual decision-making: "There are some occasions, but not many times, when I make a decision by myself. But, usually, I call meetings." Although he did not seem to make a decision by himself frequently, the Japanese manager experienced the individual decision-making. In sum, the individual decision-making was characterized as the phenomenon that organizational members make decisions about operational issues with their own judgement.

Group Decision-Making

Two Japanese presidents mentioned that there were two types of decision-making processes. The Japanese president of E Company said, "I sometimes wonder why some managers make decisions alone....and why they don't consult with someone or discuss with someone." In the E Company not only individual decision-making occurred but also another decision-making process took place, described as "consult

with someone” or “discuss with someone.” The Japanese president of C Company explicated two kinds of decision-making processes more clearly:

When a manager listens to a report from his subordinates about a problem, he has to determine if he can decide on the problem by himself or he must call other managers relevant to the problem and have a meeting to deal with it.

It was obvious that group decision-making for an operational issue was the other decision-making process. The American human resource manager of H Company referred to group decision-making resulting from an operational issue: “Well, it’s (an important issue) suggested by the different division first, and then it’s usually brought forth in front of management committee.” Her story suggested that the management committee of H Company takes care of operational issues. Furthermore, the American vice president of production of B Company discussed group decision-making in his organization: “I think that in this company, I think decision-making is tied into a network of people, and you’re never really just talking to one person.” The concepts of “discussion with someone”, “meetings”, “committee”, or “tied into a network of people” for making decisions about organizational issues were all related with group decision-making as a phenomenon caused by operational issues.

Strategic issues also generated a phenomenon of group decision-making. The Japanese president of B Company talked about strategic issues leading to group decision-making: “They (the vice presidents) make a draft of a business plan. And, then we meet together and discuss it. We make a decision by mutual agreement.” His statement indicated that strategic issues brought about group decision-making by mutual agreement.

Both strategic issues and operational issues as causal conditions gave rise to the two central phenomena in Japanese MNCs. Individual decision-making arose from operational issues as causal conditions, referring to one phenomenon that individual members made decisions with their own judgement alone. Group decision-making was identified as the other phenomenon when organizational members made decisions with meetings. Unlike individual decision-making, it stemmed from either of the two causal conditions.

Contexts of Individual Decision-Making and Group Decision-Making

A context explicates “the specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon and the particular set of conditions within which the action strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96). The two central phenomena, individual decision-making and group decision-making, had contextual indications respectively. Contextual indications included the specific set of three properties: (1) frequency, (2) duration, and (3) magnitude. These three properties are also used to express the characteristics of a phenomenon in the ground theory model (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Morrow and Smith, 1998); therefore, they were utilized as a criterion of the specific set of properties.

The degree of three properties rested on the two central phenomena; so the comparative analysis between individual decision-making and group decision-making was carried out. The frequency of individual decision-making seemed to be fewer than that of group decision-making. The American plant manager of E Company referred to the considerable frequency of group decision-making by means of meetings:

If we have quality problem, and Honda-san calls meeting, he will just call everybody in meeting. And there will be ten or fifteen people in a room to discuss...I feel that there are...we have many meetings...I would say that I spend probably eight hours out of eleven in meetings.

Duration of individual decision-making was much shorter than that of group decision-making. The American vice president of engineering of B Company mentioned the short duration of individual decision-making: "It takes only one person to say it, and to try it, and within a very short time." The American production control manager of E Company described the long duration of group decision-making: "You know, we want to have consensus before we make decision. And, that style many times results in more meetings, longer meetings, and maybe meetings that I do not have to attend, but..."

Finally, magnitude of individual decision-making was smaller than that of group decision-making. The American vice president of B Company contrasted the impact of individual decision-making to that of group decision-making: "If it's very small issue, and I'm not concerned about it, then I will just go my way (individual decision-making)... But, if it's bigger decision, actually I will go the Japanese way (group decision-making), 'Let's meet.'" As individual decision-making was related to small operational issues occurring in single area, its magnitude was also small. The American director of D Company discussed what kind of operational issues were involved with group decision-making: "We have many, many, many areas where it (an operational problem) covers more than one department...And, what we typically do is to pull people from other areas...you know, and we come together, and we have to meet." His statement indicated that there were a lot of areas in which operational issues occurred in

more than one jurisdiction and that those issues led to group decision-making. As the group decision-making was associated with the operational issues that occurred in plural functional areas, its magnitude was much bigger than that of individual decision-making. Hence, the magnitude of decision-making processes considerably depended on what properties belonged to the operational issues that gave rise to decision-making processes. In other words, small operational issues in small job areas caused individual decision-making and its magnitude was small. But operational issues occurring in more than one job area brought about group decision-making and its magnitude was bigger than that of individual decision-making.

Intervening Conditions Influencing Action Tactics

In addition to contexts, there are also intervening conditions, which are broad, general, and structural conditions that affect action tactics: They facilitate or constrain the action tactics undertaken (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Intervening conditions that influenced decision-making tactics in Japanese MNCs were (1) headquarters, (2) meeting orientation, and (3) general job descriptions.

Headquarters

Headquarters that particularly had an effect on decision-making tactics were related to strategic issues. The president of B Company articulated the headquarters' influence on action tactics about strategic issues:

Our firm is heavily influenced by the big policy of headquarters, and under this fundamental control, within this range, I am entrusted with this firm's management. Um, my discretion is limited to make a decision... Japanese board-members in the headquarter make a final decision of big things like a corporate business plan or investment proposals... My considerably important

job is to make and maintain supporters and understanding board members in the headquarters.

Japanese MNCs had to consider their headquarters with regard to strategic issues and needed the headquarters' final decisions about these issues. The headquarters were actually incorporated into portions of decision-making processes when Japanese MNCs made their decisions about strategic issues.

Meeting Orientation

The second intervening condition involved the meeting orientation that affected action tactics of Japanese MNCs. The American plant manager of A Company described several types of meetings: "We have a manager meeting every Monday. We have numerous meetings through the week, for example, morning meetings, coordinator meetings, group leader meetings. Other meetings...we have a new model meeting once a week that is very large." Those meetings were used for communication, investigation, discussion, and decision in terms of organizational issues, influencing organizational members to conduct group decision-making. E Company institutionalized communication structure in order to handle and make decisions about organizational issues. According to the participants of E Company, there were five types of meetings based on hierarchical level. The lowest level meeting dealt with daily operations while the highest level meeting managed strategic issues. The Japanese president of E Company said, "We have Worldwide Initiative Network, we call WIN (institutionalized communication structure), ...and our business plan or very important issue is examined and discussed at WIN 0 (the highest level meeting). And, there we make a decision of it." The meeting orientation influenced decision-making tactics of Japanese MNCs.

General Job Descriptions

The third intervening condition was “general job descriptions,” which seemed to have an impact upon the action tactics of decision-making processes. The American plant manager of A Company referred to the property of job descriptions used in his organization:

They're (job descriptions) not very detailed. They're very general.... I think it's (job responsibility) unclear. But, even in previous job in this company that I worked with, it was unclear. I think it was unclear on purpose.... I think it's so that we all do a good job of overlapping and making sure we don't leave gaps in things that need to be done and things. I think it's that way because we're supposed to be very team-oriented... If a manager has some issue that he needs a meeting for, we have a tendency to invite everyone.... And, we discuss it and make decision.

His statement indicated that general job descriptions contributed to the unclearness of his job responsibilities and facilitated the creation of overlapping job jurisdictions. Moreover, it showed that general job descriptions seemed to affect decision-making processes as intervening conditions. The Japanese president of B Company suggested how general job descriptions were related to group decision-making:

We are using job descriptions. But, they are not spelled out in detail... We try to make employees be flexible by removing individual job boundaries as many as possible. It is important to encourage people to cooperate with each other beyond ones' job boundaries. If they have problems, they meet and discuss problems.

The B Company utilized general job descriptions deliberately, which facilitated the removal of job boundaries that would lead to group decision-making. As

intervening conditions, general job descriptions seemed to facilitate group decision-making in Japanese MNCs.

Action Tactics of Organizational Decision-Making

Action tactics refer to the ones that are “devised to manage, handle, carry out, respond to a phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 97). Action tactics were developed in response to the two phenomena: individual decision-making and group decision-making. In the presence of the contexts and intervening conditions described in the previous two sections, there were two different categories identified as action tactics: (1) dual-step approach and (2) single-step approach. Dual-step approach was identified as the action tactic of group decision-making while single step approach emerged as the action tactic of individual decision-making. The dual-step approach consisted of analytical stages and decision stages. The analytical stages refer to examination processes in which organizational members analyze issues thoroughly and create proposals about the issues. The decision stages refer to approval processes during which top management discusses and formalizes the solutions generated through the analytical stages. The analytical stages always precede the decision stages. The other action tactic is single-step approach. It refers to decision-making processes in which individual members make quick decisions about organizational issues using exclusively ones’ own judgement.

Dual-Step Approach

Dual-step approach was related to group decision-making and handled most organizational issues. When Japanese MNCs faced operational issues, analytical stages

emerged as the first ones of dual-step approach and then decision stages followed as the second ones. Participants described analytical stages by using such words as “complete analysis,” “further analysis,” “exhaustive analysis,” “analyze it in every possible way,” “get down to the root cause of the problem,” and so forth. Also, the participants showed that the analytical stages contain the making of the proposals that will go to decision stages subsequently. The vice president of production of B Company spoke of an analytical stage: “You have to recognize that big issues get analyzed...you know, every possible way before they’re taken... I did some exhaustive analysis of it... Then, I made a proposal last year.” His statement indicated that he took a full analysis of an organizational issue and made a proposal. The American director of D Company described an analytical stage at which to make a proposal: “There’s more taking back and forth before you actually get into it, but to make sure you catch all of those points in the proposal.” The American plant manager of E Company explained about an analytical stage about an operational issue:

When we made decision on salary increases, Gary (H.R. Department) did very complete analysis of other industry in this area...in central Ohio...other Japanese companies, automotive based companies, and so on. And, put all that information together, and then we made proposal.

These descriptions identified analytical stages as decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. These analytical stages concerned examination processes during which organizational members analyzed operational issues thoroughly and made proposals for decision making.

The analytical stages described above were mainly based on individual investigations. Participants also mentioned group investigations at analytical stages.

The American production control manager of E Company talked about a group analysis: “Here, you know, there will be somebody from every department sitting in conference room discussing problem with very, you know, very detail-level to try to get down to the actual root cause of the problem.” The American plant manager of E Company also showed a group investigation by means of meetings: “If we have quality problem, and Honda-san calls meeting, he will just call everybody in meeting. And there will be ten or fifteen people in a room to discuss.” The two American managers pointed out that the group investigation would be used to analyze operational issues. The vice president of engineering of B Company also mentioned a group investigation: “We need opinions from other departments, and in those areas, we will get together...everybody together for a meeting, and discuss among everybody.” These three stories identified group examinations about operational issues at analytical stages. As discussed in the section of the magnitude of group decision-making, operational issues that occurred in plural job jurisdictions were positively associated with group decision making. So, these operational issues seem to influence the group investigations of analytical stages.

With regards to the individual analyses of analytical stages, operational issues were involved with single job jurisdiction but affected entire organizations. The story about the salary increase of E Company indicated that the operational issue of salary increase belonged to the single job jurisdiction of Human Resource Department, but that this salary issue was related to the whole organization. This type of operational issue caused the individual investigation of analytical stages.

Either individual investigations or group ones at analytical stages were identified as examination processes during which organizational members analyzed operational issues and made proposals for decision making. When operational issues took place in

more than one job area, they would give rise to group investigations at analytical stages. When operational issues occurred in single job area but would affect entire organizations, individual investigations would emerge at analytical stages.

Dual-step approach ended with decision stages. The decision stages refer to approval processes during which top management discusses and formalizes proposals created through analytical stages. The Japanese president of D Company described decision stages dealing with a proposal: “A proposal comes up to top management. And, we have a meeting and discuss it. When general managers and I agree with it, and then I sign it and end.” The Japanese president of A Company also explained about a decision stage as an action tactic: “American managers and Japanese managers discuss important issues together and decide on their policy. Then, the policy is proposed and come to our director’s meeting, and there I and the vice presidents finally discuss and approve it.” These two statements identified decision stages. At top management meetings, top executives made final decisions about whether to approve the proposals presented to them. Proposed policies with presidents’ signature became formal policies in Japanese MNCs. In this respect, the American control manager of B Company stated, “We will write it (the result of investigation) into formal policy to be signed and approved by the president of the company, and then we...that we take that formal policy or procedure, and communicate it to the employees.”

High-ranked American participants discussed a decision style more clearly. The American plant manager of E Company articulated consensus decision-making in his firm: “Every decision here is made by committee. I don’t make any major decisions without talking to the executive vice president, the president. Everything is done by consensus or committee. Nobody makes individual decisions.” The American vice

president of production of B Company also emphasized consensus: “I think you have to reach consensus. You have to...you’re not going to proceed with anything until everybody agrees.” Consensus decision-making seems to prevail at Japanese MNCs.

In short, decision stages concerned approval processes during which top management made final decisions about proposals generated in analytical stages. In those processes, consensus decision-making was utilized as a decision rule. Approved proposals with presidents’ signature were finally legitimized as official policies or procedures in Japanese MNCs.

Dual-step approach of operational issues was completed within Japanese subsidiaries while that of strategic issues was finalized in the headquarters of Japanese MNCs. Strategic issues went to analytical stages, and then were processed through two decision stages: one stage in the subsidiaries as initial decision-makers and the other stage in the headquarters as final decision-makers. The first decision stage occurred in the Japanese subsidiaries in which to approve drafts of business plans generated through analytical stages. The second decision stage subsequently took place in the headquarters in which to formalize the business plans presented by their subsidiaries. Participants mentioned that their Japanese MNCs were required to obtain the headquarters’ approval about their business plans. The president of D Company talked about two decision stages about a strategic issue.

Our firm..., a business plan is made here (in the U.S.), and we discuss it with the headquarters. The board meeting in the headquarters approves and formalizes the business plan. Here, we have another board meeting (in the U.S.), and this meeting approves the business plan first, but this approval is just on American side.

His statement indicated that the subsidiary approved a business plan locally and the headquarters made a decision about it finally. When Japanese MNCs faced strategic issues, they used the two decision stages of dual-step approach.

Single-Step Approach

Single-step approach refers to decision-making processes in which individual members make quick decisions about operational issues using exclusively ones' own judgement. Unlike dual-step approach, single-step approach did not consist of analytical stages and decision stages. Besides, the dual-step approach emphasized full investigations and consensus decision-making while the single-step approach focused on individual decision-making in a very short time. The single-step approach emerged when organizational issues were small and occurred in a small job area. The American vice president of engineering of B Company described single-step approach:

The normal American way is to say, "well, let's try this", immediately. It takes only one person to say it, and to try it, and within very short time... If it's very small issue, and I'm not concerned about it, then I will just go my way...

His story showed that he made an individual decision immediately if an issue were very small. The American plant manager of E Company also said, "If it's (an issue) small in a small area of the plant, then I will make decision very quickly. Decision is quick, concise and simple." All two cases identified single-step approach as an action tactic. If operational issues were small and occurred in a small area, Japanese MNCs would make use of the single-step approach: their managers would make decisions in short time by themselves.

Consequences

Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to consequences that are outcomes or results of actions taken for handling, managing, or responding to a phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions. There were two action tactics used in Japanese MNCs: dual-step approach and single-step approach. The dual-step approach resulted in three outcomes described by participants: (1) comprehensive solutions, (2) time consumption and (3) less stressfulness. Outcomes of single-step approach were not identified clearly on account of insufficient data. In this section, therefore, the outcomes of dual-step approach were presented.

Comprehensive Solutions

The first outcome stemming from dual-step approach was “comprehensive solutions.” The comprehensive solutions emerged in Japanese MNCs, described as “overall solution”, “best in the big picture”, “best solution in the situation”, and so forth. The American director of D Company said, “And, in some cases, a department doesn’t like the final outcome, but in the overall, it’s (a solution) the best...you know, it’s the best in the big picture.” The American plant manager of E Company also talked about this consequence:

You get a much better picture round about three hundred and sixty degree picture of situation because my thinking is from plant side, Gary’s thinking is from associate side and Tuka-san’s thinking is from financial side. And, then we decide what is best solution for that situation.

From their statements, the comprehensive solution was identified as a consequence resulting from the decision-making tactic of dual-step approach.

Time Consumption

Dual-step approach yielded time consumption as another outcome. The category of time consumption was described as “more time spent”, “longer meetings”, “very long process”, “large amount of time”, “very slow evolutionary process”, and so forth. The American vice president of B Company said, “It’s still been a very long...I bet we’ve been working three months on this analysis...a lot. I guess one of the first things I learned in here is you can’t allow yourself to get frustrated by the slower pace.” The analytical stage of dual step approach contributed to the result of time consumption. The American product control manager of E Company described an outcome from dual-step approach: “We want to have consensus before we make decision. That style many times results in more meetings, and longer meetings.” It was evident that dual-step approach produced time consumption as a consequence.

Less Stressfulness

Finally, people felt less stressful when they were involved in dual-step approach. The American control manager of B Company experienced less stress on account of the dispersion of responsibilities by means of the dual-step approach:

There is a group style management here that many people take responsibilities for those decisions. And, the outcomes of those decisions...the possible outcomes of those decisions, either good or bad, the burden of those does not rest with me alone.

The group decision tactic of dual-step approach generated less stress by dispersing responsibilities of organizational members. Furthermore, the American vice

president of production of B Company said, “Much less stress...In terms of individual pressure that’s put on you.” The dual-step approach created less stressfulness as an outcome in Japanese MNCs.

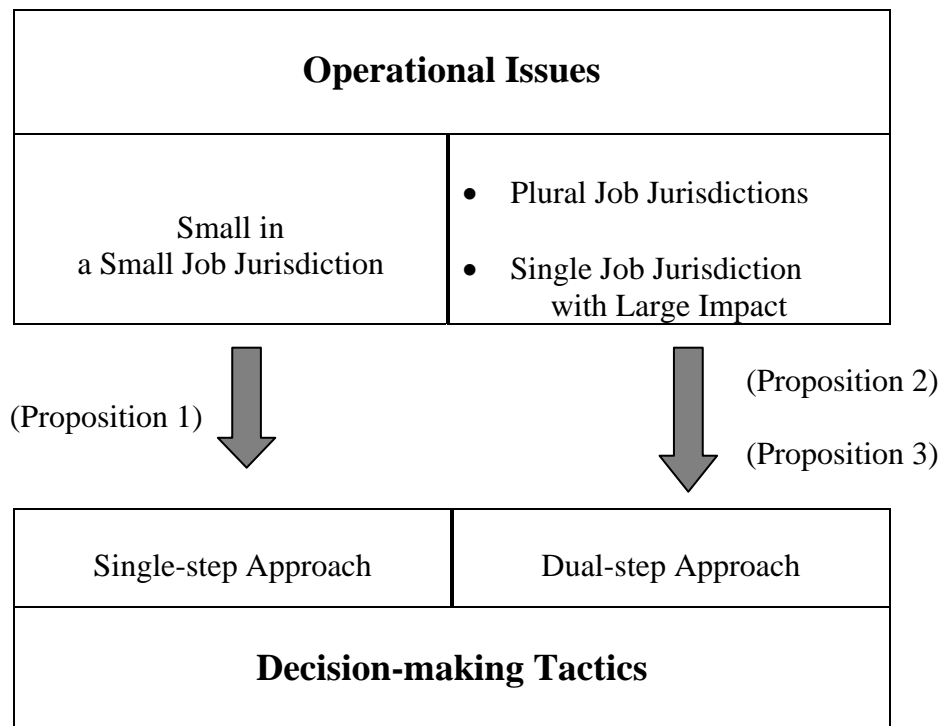
DISCUSSIONS

Decision-Making Models in Japanese MNCs

This study identified the two decision-making tactics that were practiced in the Japanese MNCs: dual-step approach and single-step approach. These two tactics depended upon two casual conditions, three contextual indications, and three intervening conditions. The two causal conditions were strategic issues and operational issues. The three contextual indications were frequency, duration, and magnitude. The three intervening conditions were headquarters, meeting orientation, and general job descriptions. Three outcomes resulted from the dual-step approach: comprehensive solutions, time consumption, and less stressfulness. Figure 1 depicted the grounded theory model for the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs, derived from the framework of Strauss and Corbin.

The above decision-making model was examined regarding each component of this model and then led to the two decision-making models that emphasized decision-making tactics, operational issues, and general job descriptions. In order to support the two decision-making models, five propositions were generated. The first decision-making model concerns two variables: operational issues and decision-making tactics, and it is related to the first three propositions of 1, 2, and 3. Figure 2 shows the relationships between the operational issues and each of the two decision-making tactics.

Figure 2. Decision-making model based on the first three propositions



The properties of operational issues determined which decision-making tactic Japanese MNCs would make use of. Single-step approach emerged when operational issues were small in a small job area. These operational issues generated the decision-making process in which individual organizational members made quick decisions with ones' own judgement. Thus, proposition 1 is created as described below.

Proposition 1

Japanese MNCs in the U.S. are likely to make use of single-step approach if operational issues are small in a small job jurisdiction.

When Japanese MNCs confronted operational issues that occurred in plural job areas, they took advantages of dual-step approach. The dual-step approach was positively associated with operational issues that occurred more than one job

jurisdiction. In addition, when operational issues occurred in single job jurisdiction but would have an impact upon the entire organization, Japanese MNCs also used the dual-step approach. The salary increase as an operational issue in E Company exemplified the latter case in terms of the single job jurisdiction with large effects. Therefore, dual-step approach will be used in Japanese MNCs if operational issues occur in plural job jurisdictions or if they occur in single job jurisdiction with large impact upon the whole organization. Proposition 2 and 3 are generated respectively.

Proposition 2

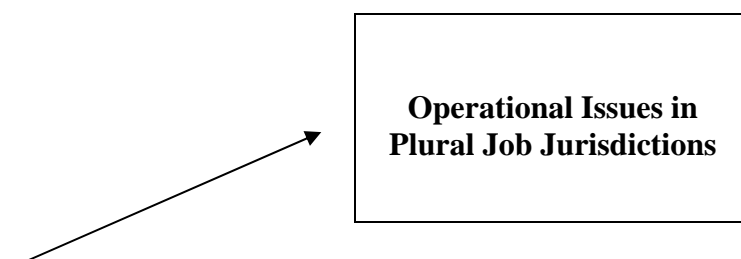
Japanese MNCs in the U.S. are likely to utilize dual-step approach if operational issues occur in plural job jurisdictions.

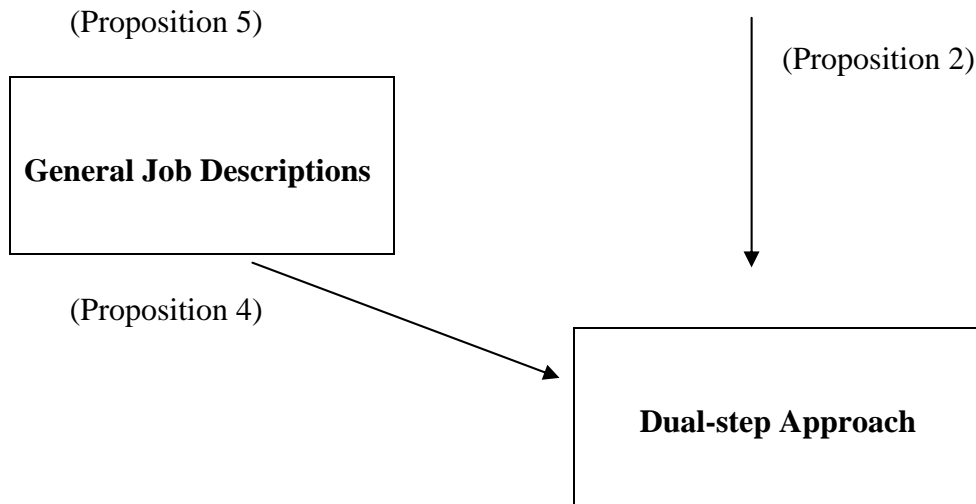
Proposition 3

Japanese MNCs in the U.S. are likely to utilize dual-step approach if operational issues occur in single job jurisdiction and affect the entire organization.

The second decision-making model is related to three variables: general job descriptions, dual-step approach, and operational issues. It is sustained by propositions 2, 4, and 5. Figure 3 illustrates the path diagram of three-variable system in which these three propositions are interrelated.

Figure 3. Path diagram of the three-variable system





General job descriptions practiced in Japanese MNCs seem to perform as intervening conditions that positively influence dual-step approach. General job descriptions facilitated the unclearness of job responsibilities and the elimination of job boundaries. Because of this facilitation, if operational issues took place, organizational members would tend to discuss how the operational issues affect their unclear job jurisdictions and would need to determine whose job jurisdictions are involved with the operational issues. It would be difficult for organizational members to make decisions by their own judgement alone. The American plant manager of A Company, which employed general job descriptions, talked about a tendency of organizational members: “If a manager has some issue that he needs meeting for, we have tendency to invite everybody.” This statement explains about the impact of general job descriptions upon dual-step approach because the unclearness of job responsibilities facilitates the dual-step approach in which organizational members investigate operational issues. The general job descriptions result in the facilitation of dual-step approach. The fourth proposition is produced below.

Proposition 4

General job descriptions are likely to facilitate dual-step approach in Japanese MNCs in the U.S.

General job descriptions positively influenced the unclearness of job responsibilities and facilitated the creation of overlapping job areas. The overlapping areas indicate that ones' job jurisdictions are partially covered with others' job jurisdictions. When operational issues occur in the organization that practices general job descriptions, they will be involved with either the overlapping areas or single job area. Thus, the general job descriptions create the possibilities that the operational issues may occur in the overlapping areas that are composed of plural job jurisdictions. As general job descriptions promote the generation of overlapping job areas, they possibly have an effect on the occurrence of operational issues in plural job jurisdictions. Therefore, the last proposition is made as follows:

Proposition 5

General job descriptions are likely to affect the occurrence of operational issues in plural job jurisdictions in Japanese MNCs in the U.S.

Proposition 2 shows that Japanese MNCs in the U.S. are likely to utilize dual-step approach if operational issues occur in plural job jurisdictions. In other words, the occurrence of operational issues in plural job jurisdictions will have a positive impact upon the dual-step approach. Because general job descriptions affect the occurrence of

those issues, they also facilitate the dual-step approach indirectly. In the light of the general job descriptions, the operational issues that occur in plural job jurisdictions become mediating variables in the path diagram as illustrated in Figure 3. This diagram shows a three-variable system such that there are two causal paths going into the dual-step approach: the direct impact of general job descriptions (proposition 4) and the mediating impact of operational issues (proposition 2). There is also a path from general job descriptions to operational issues (proposition 5). The general job descriptions facilitate the dual-step approach and increase the occurrence of operational issues in plural job areas. These operational issues also facilitate the dual-step approach.

The first three propositions demonstrate which properties of operational issues make Japanese MNCs utilize which decision-making tactic, single-step approach or dual-step approach. The three propositions of 2, 4, and 5 illustrate how the three variables are interrelated with each other by focusing on general job descriptions. Although dual-step approach itself seems to be characterized as a decision-making tactic of Japanese MNCs, the two decision-making models sustained by the five propositions structurally explain about the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs as their traits.

Comparison of Previous Research

Some researchers discuss that *ringi* system and *nemawashi* processes are practically used in overseas Japanese MNCs (Harvany and Pucik, 1981; Yoshino, 1975; Maguire and Pascale, 1978; Negandhi and Baliga, 1981; Sumihara, 1993). But, the result of this study indicated that none of the 8 Japanese MNCs practiced the *ringi* system and the *nemawashi* processes with the exception of the accrual of expense in E

Company. The E Company had used *ringi* system without *nemawashi* processes only when expenses accrued. In fact, the firm practiced the two decision-making tactics when most organizational issues took place. The other Japanese MNCs also did not make use of the *ringi* system and the *nemawashi* processes within their subsidiaries. Therefore, it would be concluded that Japanese MNCs do not exercise the *ringi* system and the *nemawashi* processes as decision-making tactics. Rather, they use the two decision-making tactics: dual step approach and single step approach.

Why is the research finding of this study inconsistent with the previous research findings? There seem to be two reasons of this discrepancy. One reason may be attributed to sampling errors. The number of sample was only 8 Japanese MNCs, which were located in Ohio area; thus, larger sample size may contribute to the reconciliation of this discrepancy.

The other reason of this discrepancy may be transformation of *ringi* system and *nemawashi* processes. Yoshihara, Hayashi and Yasumuro (1998) discuss that most Japanese subsidiaries broadly modify a Japanese decision-making process based on the *ringi* system. The purpose of the *ringi* system and the *nemawashi* processes is to make decisions by creating organizational consensus. In the light of organizational consensus, dual-step approach may be similar to the traditional Japanese decision-making process. However, detailed examination made differences between them. For instance, the *nemawashi* processes may be analogous to the analytical stages of dual-step approach in terms of proposal making.

However, the *nemawashi* processes focuses on “informal face-to-face communication” between organizational members in order to build informal organizational consensus before formal decision-making. The analytical stages,

however, are irrelevant to “informal face-to-face communication” of the *nemawashi* processes. The analytical stages emphasize “thorough examinations” by means of individual investigations or group investigations. In fact, 8 Japanese presidents stated that *nemawashi* processes were not practiced within their subsidiaries. Thus, the *nemawashi* processes are not identical with the analytical stages of dual-step approach. *Ringi* system is also similar to the decision stages of dual step approach in terms of both hierarchical communication structure and the approval function. But, the *ringi* system is a formal process in which each manager affixes one’s seal, stamp, or signature as agreement on proposals during a circulation of its official document. The decision stages of dual-step approach are more substantial processes in which organizational members discuss and decide on proposal.

Consequently, the *ringi* system and the *nemawashi* processes are different from the dual-step approach. This perspective is supported by the argument of Yoshihara, Hayashi, and Yasumoto (1998): the nature of the *ringi* system, a consensus making process, lies in Japanese MNCs but the *ringi* system itself is not used in every Japanese subsidiary in the U.S. Thus, it is inferred that the traditional Japanese decision-making process has probably evolved to the dual-step approach in Japanese MNCs.

Future Studies

Future research should explore the extension of sample size of research subjects and the extension of the sample to research subjects in terms of top management composition (i.e., American president or Japanese president). Although there is not the specific number of samples for the requirement of grounded theory, Creswell suggests that 20 to 30 subjects be appropriate (1998). In this respect, the small sample size of

this present study may have contributed to the discrepancy between the previous findings and this research finding. Larger sample size will generate more complete decision-making models of Japanese MNCs by reconciling the discrepancy. Top management composition may also impact decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs. If American presidents or CEOs manage Japanese MNCs, their decision-making tactics will possibly be different from those of Japanese presidents. In order to understand and investigate decision-making processes in Japanese MNCs more comprehensively, the future research should explore the extension of the above two areas.

CONCLUSIONS

This present study examined the decision-making processes exercised in Japanese MNCs and generated the grounded theoretical model of the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. The result pointed out that the two decision tactics, especially dual-step approach, were practically utilized in Japanese MNCs. The two decision-making models sustained by five propositions were also produced, describing the characteristics of the decision-making processes of Japanese MNCs. This study concluded that *ringi* system and *nemawashi* processes were not practically used in Japanese MNCs; rather, the traditional Japanese decision-making process had evolved to the dual-step approach. Future studies were addressed, showing that the extension of sample size and that of the sample to research subjects would be important for the creation of more comprehensive decision-making models of Japanese MNCs.

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