

A non-essentialist model of culture: Implications of identity, agency and structure within multinational/multicultural organizations

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Introduction

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One of the main references:

Nathan, G. 2010. *Social Freedom in a Multicultural State: Towards a Theory of Intercultural Justice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan

Outline

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Why should we talk about cultural paradigms?

- Although many scholars reject essentialism and overgeneralization and acknowledging cultural diversity within a nation (Holliday, 2011; McSweeney, 2009), in cross-cultural management and organization studies **essentialist notions of culture** implicitly or explicitly **underlie the models of culture**.
- Such notions of culture (which includes cultural dimensions) may simplify models of culture but **suppress agency for choice and change**.
- Furthermore, such notions **do not address multiple and shifting identities and presumes singular identity (equating nationality of origin)**.
- **Should we keep teaching such notions of culture** just because they provide neat structure restricting individuals' ethical horizons leading to self-fulfilling prophecy by **stereotyping individuals and managing them as 'cultural dopes'?**

The paradigms of essentialism vs. non-essentialism

ESSENTIALIST PARADIGM

- Rooted in human nature
- Static
- Homogeneous
- Holistic
- Deterministic
- Bounded

NON-ESSENTIALIST PARADIGM

- Rooted in human conditions
- Dynamic (with continuity and change)
- Heterogeneous
- Internally riven
- Changeable
- Blurred boundaries

A critique of the paradigm of 5-7-9 cultural dimensions

- The paradigm of 5-7-9 cultural dimensions
 - Hofstede's model (5)
 - Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's model (7)
 - GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness) research (9)
- Also included: Schwartz's model: 7 value orientations
- The underlying notion is that culture could be understood in terms of value orientations (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961)

What are the problems with value orientations?

- It can be **based on human nature** instead of human conditions
- **Human conditions do vary** (over time and space) and are not static
- **Values can differ** even within a territorially bounded (including smaller) nation – e.g. sub-groups – which is **heterogeneous** not homogeneous
- **Values can shift over time** through changes in human conditions among political, societal, economic, environmental and technological dimensions (Tipton, 2009; Wu, 2006)
- **Meanings of identity can change**
- **Are those values descriptive or normative and how can they be integrated?**
- **How many values can fully determine individuals within a presumed culture (cultural identity)?**

The issue

The paradigm of 5-7-9 cultural dimensions tends to essentialize national culture and ignores agency and identity – these have implications for organizational culture!

Impacts of undermining agency and identity within culture in relation to work and organizations

- Assumption of a singular identity implicitly or explicitly equating to the national culture ignores individuals' multiple intersecting and shifting identities over time and space
- It restricts individuals' 'ethical horizons' (Nathan, 2010)
- National identities are not fixed in time (and space)
- Therefore, such a notion of identity can lead to ossify individuals; cultural conformity and stereotyping can lead to reinforcing certain social injustices within organizations and restricts agency for choice and change!

Impacts of undermining agency and identity (contd.)

- Singular identity when stigmatised can lead to ‘**mode of oppression**’ instead of ‘mode of being’ (Modood, 2005)
- Therefore, culture can become with such essentialist notions as a vehicle for ‘**cultural racism**’! (colour racism may decline but cultural racism could rise)

Implications (cond.)

- If individuals in an organization are expected to behave, and are treated, with descriptive value orientations that ignore agency for choice and change along with normative value orientations, then **it is not clear how one might embark on an organizational cultural change according to certain ethical norms**

Agency and structure

- Agency and structure interact with each other (Giddens, 1984)
- The structure can provide context and constraints to people of a society to engage in their activities and solve problems
- However, **structure does not entail characterizing culture without any regard to agency for change**

Institutional structure and national culture

- Institutional structure is subject to change and not writ large; therefore it cannot be essentialized as their national culture:
- ... a nation's communications systems along with policies on freedom of speech and press; a transport system along with policies on freedom of movement of goods and people; financial institutions along with policies on the economy; and social institutions along with policies on social welfare shape people's capabilities to pursue their activities. Nonetheless these *institutional aspects and policies do not warrant essentializing nationality of origin or ethnicity*. (Nathan, 2010: 92; emphasis added).

Professor Nigel Holden's insight to **break away from the 'Hofstedian grip'**:

- Based on his 25 years' involvement in cross cultural management education and research (Holden, 2008:249):
 - For the intellectual health of the discipline, cross cultural researchers (and trainers) have got to breakaway from the Hofstedian grip and be **prepared to think the impossible, such as a cross cultural management paradigm without values – or rather without more or less canonical tables of values – at its centre, or even a cross cultural management that can dispense with national culture as a sacred variable.**

A model of culture within the paradigm of non-essentialism – a point of departure

- We need to understand ‘culture’ as **dynamic intersecting ‘cultural systems’** and **interacting social institutions/organizations** in which persons **individually or collectively** interact with others, directly or indirectly, **to pursue their complex of purposes** (see Nathan, 2010 based on Dilthey’s works)
- Such an understanding **rejects essentialist notions of culture being static, bounded and holistic within internal uniformity**
- It also effectively **move away from the ‘false debate’ of dichotomy between ‘institutions’ and culture’** (see Jackson, 2013)

What does it mean?

- It gives significance to agency for change and **allows meanings to be given from the agency perspective by the individual who participates** with the social world comprising these systems and institutions.
- The individual who stands **at the intersection** of these myriad intersecting systems and interacts with institutions **with multiple intersecting identities, give and derive meanings individually and collectively.**
- Therefore, such a dynamic concept of social interactionism and meanings **does not reify culture and ossify individuals with a singular identity within culture.**

Three basic social facts

1. Human diversity is inevitable
2. We live in an ethical plural society
3. We are interdependent beings

(Nathan, 2010)

➤ The above basic social facts can lead to vulnerability of asymmetrical power relations of domination and subordination among various groups and members of society

Meanings and contestation

- We have to be cautious in ascribing meanings of cultural practices at face value without considering the present-day circumstances in which **meanings of those older/traditional practices are contestable and contesting**.
- Therefore, the paradigm of 5-7-9 cultural dimensions should be subject to the totality of the circumstances rather than **ascribing meanings by the observer based on those central tendencies of the cultural dimensions of a nation, which is tantamount to essentializing culture and ossifying individuals**, disregarding agency, shifting multiple intersecting identities and the context of the meaning in which agency seeks and gives meanings.

Meanings and identity

‘cultural identities do not carry a pre-given meaning that people passively enact, as is sometimes assumed, but become infused with meaning in organizational actors’ interpretations that are embedded in specific social contexts’ (Ybema and Byun, 2009:339).

- We need to take into consideration the individuals’ **ideas of life** and **lived experience**, which is the philosophical position of Dilthey – ‘idealism-realism (*Idealrealismus*)’. **This aspect captures both descriptive and normative value orientations, the context and change.**

One's worldview

- One's context is not solely determined by one's membership in one's culture, whether it is a national culture or subculture of one's ethnicity; it is an intersection of many cultural systems and common institutions.
- One's worldview (*Weltanschauung*) is formed gradually through one's ideas of life and lived experience (Nathan, 2010).

Implications for organizational culture: Agency, identity and structure

- Meanings should be understood from the participant's perspective who is at the intersection of intersecting various cultural systems and interacting institutions → **do not ascribe meanings from the observer's perspective**
- Agents have multiple intersecting collective identities and personal identities → **be wary of ascribing a singular identity and pre-given meaning within all contexts (can lead to misrecognition and non-recognition *in their* identities)**
- **Diversity management should move beyond ascribing singular identities of nationality as cultural identities, religion, race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality → consider the implications of multiple intersecting identities and asymmetrical power relations**

Employees and 'employeeeship'

- They are not cultural dopes as resources to be managed -> consider them as **stakeholders with agency for change and choice**;
- Human Resource Management (HRM) should be renamed to provide meaning for change -> call **Employee Stakeholder Management (ESM)**
- **Focus on employeeeship instead of leadership**
 - Fosters **employee responsibility and ownership with autonomy**
 - Fosters **self-respect**

Potential structure

- Network structure
- Enables horizontal system communication
- Enables recognition (in their identities) and non-domination (autonomy) (Nathan, 2010; also Nathan, 2014)
- Can facilitate effective dialogue, deliberation and engagement

Conclusion and future directions for research

- It is futile to continue teaching and practicing the paradigm of 5-7-9 cultural dimensions to pave the way for democratising multicultural/multinational organizations
- A non-essentialist model of culture effectively moves away from 'Hofstedian grip' although it does not provide neat structure and parsimony
- **Enables change of organizational/corporate culture and to develop effective code of conduct**
- Future directions:
 - CMS (Critical Management Studies)
 - Qualitative research



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