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

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Introduction

Mainly based on the article published:


One of the main references:

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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 presume 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 (Kluckholn 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 polices 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 ‘employeeship’

- 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 employeeship 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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