

A New Approach to the Study of Cultural Diversity which Transcends Stereotypes

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Abstract

Ways of measuring culture in the American social sciences are not “culture free”. We use all the preferences and biases which are part of our culture. Most prominent among these is the habit of dichotomizing polarities, so that cultures are deemed to operate at the far ends of dimensions in an either-or mode. A cultural paradigm is a pattern we take for granted before research begins and is not itself questioned. This paper questions it. Nations tend to believe that wealth is created by the cultures they prefer and admire, so that in effect business scholarship is US culture writ large. We examine the way other nations think to see if this is not equally legitimate. A new form of measurement that transcends East-West differences is suggested.

Introduction

The problem: culturally biased ways of measuring culture.

American and European cross-cultural studies suffer from Western cultural biases, which also shape our social sciences. These result in stereotyping or more politely “socio types”. The disciplines of the social sciences are not “above culture”, they are *part of* culture and are slanted against many foreign cultures, so we fail to understand these. The principal bias is that of *polarity, linearity, and dichotomy*, otherwise known as the tyranny of either/or thinking and the excluded middle ground. For example, Geert Hofstede (1980) and Fons Trompenaars (1992) both dichotomize Individualism – Collectivism. The former dichotomizes high and low Power Distance, Masculinity---Femininity, and high and low Uncertainty Avoidance. The latter dichotomizes Universalism --- Particularism, Specificity—Diffusion, status through Achievement---Ascription, Inner-direction---Outer-direction and Sequential---Synchronous orientations to time. Trompenaars has drawn most of his classifications from Parsons (1951) and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961).

Expressed in another way we could say the West’s bias in favor of Specificity (specific, taxonomies of “things”) is also a feature of our academic studies of culture. We treat any cultural orientation towards Universal rules as a “thing” at the far end of a polarity and any Particular exception as another dichotomized “thing” apart from any rules. And we classify cultures as belonging to one of these extremities or to the other. The assumption is that cultures interested in legal, scientific and moral laws are of necessity opposed to any particular exceptions and conversely that cultures in search of uniqueness and particular differences are of necessity opposed to rules and generalizations.

A moment’s reflection might reveal this as very strange indeed. Since when can any rules be established without the closest attention to exceptions? What of the famous Scottish proverb “the exception proves (tests) the rule.”? What is the Null Hypothesis about except assuming

that no relationship exists until this has been proved by experimentation? Do we not become more certain through systematic doubt? Are we seriously contending that America, a culture high in Individualism *has no interest at all* in Communities and institutions or that this orientation forecloses such an interest? Are we saying the China, a culture high in Community orientation, has *no interest at all* in Individualism and that such an interest would sap its sense of Community? What is a “voluntary association” save a community of individuals who choose to work together? The claim that this cultural preference reduces a person’s individuality is simply absurd. S/he has chosen to work with and for others.

The paradigmatic assumptions behind measurement

Measurement does not occur in a vacuum, but within a *paradigm* or pattern of assumptions. This paradigm is assumed *a priori* to an investigation and is not *itself* questioned by any investigation. It cannot be proved right or wrong but is part of culture. When Western researchers measure cultural variables this puts their respondents within various nations at one end OR the other of a continuum and *subtracts* one preference from the other. This defies common sense and everyday experience. Since when is a culture static? Since when are we stuck at one point, or at either end of a dichotomy? Since when does being an individual, being free and independent *preclude a concern for the wider community*? Why does Bill Gates spend half his life making money and the other half giving it away, a habit shared with many of America’s famous entrepreneurs who gave their names to charitable foundations? Individualism was not enough for them.

We might well ask how an individualist knows whether s/he has succeeded in the quest for self-fulfillment. What is the evidence that individuals have met their career goals and their ultimate objectives? Surely they *need the community to recognize their achievements*, so that the individual and the community are not opposed positions, but a single process and dynamic in which the person serves the community so well that s/he is taken to its heart. Rather than just a dichotomy dividing people in Western style, there are also relationships joining people in Eastern style, as in *guanxi*, Chinese for “relationship”. In Western social science, facts are naturally separate and we must prove their correlation. In Asian perspectives, facts and people are naturally related and we must prove the value of their independence.

Research problem: Stereotypes of community

To refer to Asian preference for community as “collectivism”, it is tinged with Cold War rhetoric. Collectivism is bureaucratic, state socialism. The challenge we face is not from this source, but from Confucian family-style networks of enterprise, which have already made the Chinese Diaspora into the 4th largest economy in the world. State Owned Enterprises (SOE’s) in China are losing market share, so much for “collectivism”. Town and Village Enterprises (TVE’s) based in communities have expanded by several thousand percent since 1979. Here lies the genuine power of community. This is an expression of Taoism where contrasting values are joined rather than dichotomized, where these create new harmonies, fusions and innovative combinations.

Literature Review

Opposed views on the origins of entrepreneurship

Take the origins of entrepreneurship. In the West we are confident that these are outstanding and redoubtable individualists who defied received opinion and set up businesses of their own through inner-directed initiatives and personal achievements. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1992) show clearly that most American managers prefer Individualism to Community orientation, Inner-direction to Outer-direction and Achievement orientation to Ascribing status. Case proved? Not quite.

Certainly this is how Americans *think* about entrepreneurship but is this the whole truth about that phenomenon?

Consider another line of evidence. English Quakers were a dissenting religious community, heavily involved in the British industrial revolution. They produced *forty times more wealth than their numbers justified* see D.K. Hurst (1995). Half of all Britain's great entrepreneurs, whose religion can be traced, were of Non-Conformist religion in a culture where 6% were of that persuasion see E. Hagen (1961). Many Non-Conformists immigrated to the USA and prospered there.

So prolific were the business skills of French Huguenots that they were forbidden at one point from leaving France! Entrepreneurship has been repeatedly connected to the migration of ethnic and religious communities, so that Indians outside India, the Chinese outside China, the Irish outside Ireland and Poles outside Poland often do better in business than those who stayed at home. The Chinese Diaspora is of especial interest. Were this treated as one economy it would be the fourth largest in the world. Ming-Jer Chen (2001) describes its feats. A 3% Chinese community in the Philippines is responsible for 71% of that nation's wealth. This pattern is repeated in Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia. Parts of Seattle are called New Hong Kong. Singaporeans are three times richer than Malaysians from whose federation they were expelled.

One reason for China's sudden economic take-off after the death of Mao in 1979 is that the Confucian business model of the Diaspora was brought back home. Everything else had failed to work and of course joining the market *brings individuality back into the community*. Chinese families were allowed to form their own companies and literally thousands of these sprang up assisted and joined by town and village officials who were supposed to be regulating them!

The migrant stranger in the strange land

What happens when you are a stranger in a strange land along with a small group of persons in a similar situation? You form a *networked community*, perhaps of only thirty to forty others who depend *entirely* on each other for survival. Should you betray any member of this small community it will be known to many of them before sunset and your means of survival are gone. For that reason "my word in my bond" was the famous motto of the Quakers who did not have to write down financial transactions because neither party would renege. It saved a lot of time and led to the trading floor where orders were voiced and accepted in seconds.

In short, a completely different image of entrepreneurship emerges from these insights. *It has everything to do with Community* with credit unions to avoid banks and “beautiful Jews” arbitrating disputes in their own communities at a fraction of the cost of lawyers. More recently innovation has been located geographically in key regions of the USA. Without the group norms of the Bay Area, Silicon Valley, Cambridge-Boston, Seattle, Boulder Co., Austin, Texas, New York and Los Angeles 75% of all innovation would be lost according to Richard Florida (2002) Even more recently Henry Chesborough (2008) has extolled “Open Innovation” a particular form of community formed by members of supply chains, where the customer encourages his suppliers to innovate and keep him informed about crucial new components and raw materials. Indeed it may no longer be the single firm that prospers so much as the community of networked members all helping each other to succeed.

We must measure the interaction BETWEEN cultural values

What really matters in making cultures creative, prosperous and nurturing of their membership. It is not their relative preference for Rules or Exceptions, Individuals or Communities, Masculine or Feminine. It is not whether, when forced, they prefer one to another, but *whether the two have been reconciled and made compatible*. Has the rule proved genuinely *universal* because all *particular* exceptions were noted and the rule modified? Has the *individual* defied received opinion and earned the gratitude of the *community* despite it all? Did that *community* nurture his/her *individuality*? When you analyze problems into *specific* pieces are you now in a better position to create a *diffuse* synthesis or pattern of connections? Remember more and more products are becoming modular systems.

Should we judge a new product by how much money it can *achieve* in the market place or are some issues like global warming or solar energy so important we should *ascribe* status to them initially and then *achieve* them? Should we be *inner-directed* like a prize fighter in the boxing ring flooring an opponent, or should we be *outer-directed* like a Kung Fu fighter redirecting the energy of an opponent? The answer to such questions is BOTH. We need all around agility and *intercultural competence* to initiate and to respond and as the economic world grows ever more turbulent responding well is vital. This is where the strengths of East Asia lie. But above all, our Asian competitors know how to put Yin and Yang together while we insist on separating these. We are going to go under unless we wake up to this new reality.

Not wrong but only half right

The conventional approach to culture is less wrong than half right. To some extent being an Individualist DOES preclude Community, especially in a sound-bite, ideological culture with an attention-span of seconds, especially in the hands of the Tea Party Republicans and the 61% of Americans who believe in the Devil. If we HAD to choose between individualism and the community the former is a lot less dangerous. Millions of Chinese have starved in spectacular “leaps forward” and cultural revolutions that actually took them backwards. When a whole community makes a major error it’s a lot more dangerous. But we argue that we do NOT have to choose one over the other. Good communities nurture caring individuals and this should be our aim. Moreover the Chinese have grasped that “one nation two systems” as they call it actually helps them. They learn from both sides. They aim to be the Middle Kingdom, the harmonious realm between conflicts as they were once before in the Tang dynasty and its aftermath. .

A new form of measurement

We recently tested out a new form of measurement and applied it to entrepreneurship classes in Singapore. It borrows from the conventional Western methodology of the Lickert Scale and combines this with the Eastern concepts of harmony, or synergy as we call it in the West.

We set out to measure the effectiveness with which innovation was being taught and we defined innovation in at least ten ways. The first was that the innovator *turns ideals into realities*. So first we measured the Ideal vs. the Real as straight line dichotomies Western style. If we thought this wrong we would not do it. We think it is *insufficient*. So we asked students in a highly successful course that had generated 55 start-ups the following question.

“Please indicate your judgment of the undergraduate courses you once took at this university and compare these with your completed innovation course. Score the undergraduate courses you remember by using a U. Score the innovation course you remember using an I.

- a. My education has been realistic. It readies me for the world as it is, not necessarily as it might be, It is practical and effective.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

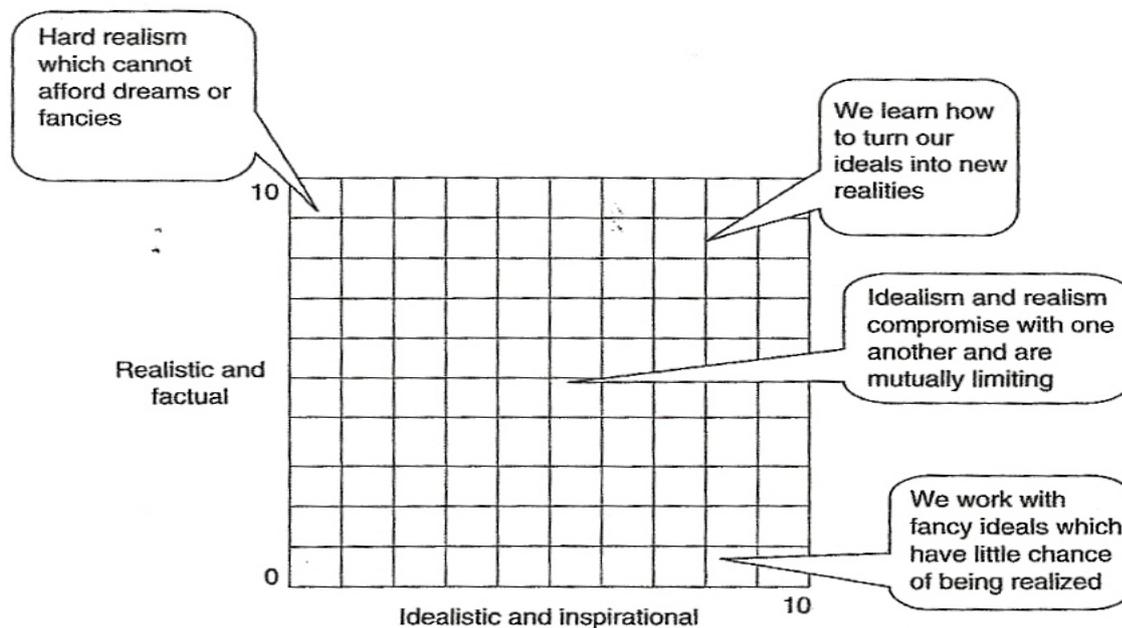
- b. My education has been idealistic. It shows me how realities can be changed, so as to create new values. It is inspirational.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Thus far we have been entirely Western and orthodox but is it at all possible to measure whether these two values fuse, harmonize and are synergistic? Can we estimate the extent to which ideals have *become* realities? We believe we can do this. We instruct respondents as follows.

“Please enter your scores above into the Grid below but to help you four balloons will pop up to prompt your answers. You may change your answers since we have slightly changed the question and we want to discover to what extent, if at all, the ideals you were taught proved realizable by you so that the difference between the real and the ideal were transcended.”

HOW CAN INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGIES BE MEASURED?



GRID 3.1 Realism vs. idealism

What we found was that between 50% and 35% of the Innovation class scored in the top nine squares on the Grid. We asked nine other questions including Universal rules vs. Particular exceptions, Individuality vs. Group or team orientation, Specific objectivity vs. Diffuse patterns and connections, and Inner vs. Outer-directedness. It did not matter very much which question we asked. Highly innovative respondents *reconciled cultural values in general*. If they were in the top nine squares in Idealism---Realism *they were extremely likely to be in this quadrant on all other questions*. These results reminded me of a quote by Abraham Maslow and his investigation of self-actualizing people.

“The age-old opposition between heart and head, reason and instinct, or cognition and conation was seen to disappear in healthy people where they became synergic rather than antagonists ...The dichotomy between selfishness and unselfishness disappears... because in principle every act is both selfish *and* unselfish. Our subjects are simultaneously very spiritual and very pagan and sensual. Duty cannot be contrasted with pleasure or work with play where duty *is* pleasure and work *is* play. Similar findings have been reached for... concreteness-abstraction, acceptance-rebellion ...serious-humorous, lust-love and a thousand philosophical dilemmas are found to have more than two horns or paradoxically no horns at all.”

Conclusion

We fail to go beyond Western cultures and we fail to appreciate the growing challenge from the East unless and until we include the ways in which they think in our methodologies for assessing cultures. We have to grasp that methodologies are in themselves aspects of our own culture, not neutral tools reflecting god-given realities. Science is interactive and interacts with cultures. East Asians have a higher cultural preference for exceptions than for

rules for communities than for individuals and for diffuse relationships than for specifics. But this is not the most salient point or the real threat to our hegemony. Cultures influenced by Taoism look to BOTH ends of any dichotomy and seek to marry these. They are learning from us because our views are relevant but we are failing to learn from them because they are at the rejected end of a value dichotomy. A methodology has been presented that allows to measure in both Eastern and Western ways, but most important of all measures intercultural competence and the reconciliation of diverse perspectives.

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