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Beyond sophisticated stereotyping: Cultural sensemaking in context

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Executive Overview

Much of our cross-cultural training and research occurs within the framework of bipolar cultural dimensions. While this sophisticated stereotyping is helpful to a certain degree, it does not convey the complexity found within cultures. People working across cultures are frequently surprised by cultural paradoxes that do not seem to fit the descriptions they have learned. The authors identify the sources of cultural paradoxes and introduce the idea of value trumping: In a specific context, certain cultural values take precedence over others. Thus, culture is embedded in the context and cannot be understood fully without taking context into consideration. To decipher cultural paradoxes, the authors propose a model of cultural sensemaking, linking schemas to contexts. They spell out the implications of this model for those who teach culture, for people working across cultures, and for multinational corporations.

If U.S. Americans are so individualistic and believe so deeply in self-reliance, why do they have the highest percentage of charitable giving in the world and readily volunteer their help to community projects and emergencies?

In a 1991 survey, many Costa Rican customers preferred automatic tellers over human tellers because "at least the machines are programmed to say 'good morning' and 'thank you.'"[1] Why is it that so many Latin American cultures are noted for warm interpersonal relationships and a cultural script of *simpatía* (positive social behavior),[2] while simultaneously exhibiting seeming indifference as service workers in both the private and public sectors?

Based on Hofstede's[3] value dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance, the Japanese have a low tolerance for uncertainty while Americans have a high tolerance. Why then do the Japanese intentionally incorporate ambiguous clauses in their business contracts, which are unusually short, while Americans dot every i, cross every t, and painstakingly spell out every possible contingency?

Many people trained to work in these cultures found such situations to be paradoxical when they first encountered them. These examples often contradict and confound our attempts to neatly categorize cultures. They violate our conceptions of what we think particular cultures are like. Constrained, stereotypical thinking is not the only problem, however. The more exposure and understanding one gains about any culture, the more paradoxical it often becomes. For example, U.S. Americans are individualistic in some situations (e.g., "the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued is the right to be left alone"[4]) and collectivist in others (e.g., school fundraising events).

Long-term sojourners and serious cultural scholars find it difficult to make useful generalizations since so many exceptions and qualifications to the stereotypes, on both a cultural and individual level, come to mind. These cultural paradoxes are defined as situations that exhibit an apparently contradictory nature.

Surprisingly, there is little mention of cultural paradoxes in the management literature.[5] Our long-term sojourns as expatriates (a combined total of 22 years), as well as our experience in teaching cross-cultural management, preparing expatriates to go overseas, and doing comparative research, has led us to feel increasingly frustrated with the accepted conceptualizations of culture. Thus, our purpose is to focus attention on cultural

paradoxes, explain why they have been overlooked and why they exist, and present a framework for making sense of them. Our intent is to initiate a dialogue that will eventually provide teachers, researchers, and people who work across cultures with a more useful way to understand culture.

A look at the comparative literature reveals that cultures are described in somewhat limited terms.[6] There are 22 dimensions commonly used to compare cultures, typically presented in the form of bipolar continua, with midpoints in the first examples, as shown in Table 1. These dimensions were developed to yield greater cultural understanding and allow for cross-cultural comparisons. An unanticipated consequence of using these dimensions, however, is the danger of stereotyping entire cultures.

Sophisticated Stereotyping

In many parts of the world, one hears a generic stereotype for a disliked neighboring ethnic group—"The (fill in the blank) are lazy, dirty thieves, and their women are promiscuous." This is a low-level form of stereotyping, often based on lack of personal contact and an irrational dislike of people who are different from oneself. Professors and trainers work very hard to dispel such stereotypes. Rarely, however, do we stop to consider whether we are supplanting one form of stereotyping for another. For example, when we teach students and managers how to perceive the Israelis using Hofstede's[7] cultural dimensions, they may come to think of Israelis in terms of small power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance, moderate femininity, and moderate individualism. The result is to reduce a complex culture to a shorthand description they may be tempted to apply to all Israelis. We call this sophisticated stereotyping, because it is based on theoretical concepts and lacks the negative attributions often associated with its lower-level counterpart. Nevertheless, it is still limiting in the way it constrains individuals' perceptions of behavior in another culture.

Do we recommend against teaching the cultural dimensions shown in Table 1 so as to avoid sophisticated stereotyping? Not at all. These dimensions are useful tools in explaining cultural behavior. Indeed, cultural stereotypes can be helpful—provided we acknowledge their limitations. They are more beneficial, for example, in making comparisons between cultures than in understanding the wide variations of behavior within a single culture. Adler[8] encourages the use of "helpful stereotypes," which have the following limitations: They are consciously held, descriptive rather than evaluative, accurate in their description of a behavioral norm, the first best guess about a group prior to having direct information about the specific people involved, and modified based on further obser-

Table 1
Common Cultural Dimensions

Subjugation to nature	Harmony	Mastery of nature
Past	Present	Future
Being	Containing and controlling	Doing
Hierarchical relationships	Group	Individualistic
Private space	Mixed	Public
Evil human nature	Neutral or mixed	Good
Human nature as changeable		Human nature as unchangeable
Monochronic time		Polychronic time
High-context language		Low-context language
Low uncertainty avoidance		High uncertainty avoidance
Low power distance		High power distance
Short-term orientation		Long-term orientation
Individualism		Collectivism
Masculinity		Femininity
Universalism		Particularism
Neutral		Emotional
Diffuse		Specific
Achievement		Ascription
Individualism		Organization
Inner-directed		Outer-directed
Individualism (competition)		Group-organization (collusion)
Analyzing (reductivist)		Synthesizing (larger, integrated wholes)

Sources: Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961); Hall & Hall (1990); Hofstede (1980); Parsons & Shils (1951); Trompenaars & Hampden Turner (1993); Trompenaars (1994). The dimensions are bipolar continua, with the first six containing midpoints.

vations and experience. As teachers, researchers, and managers in cross-cultural contexts, we need to recognize that our original characterizations of other cultures are best guesses that we need to modify as we gain more experience.

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For understandable, systemic reasons, business schools tend to teach culture in simple-minded terms, glossing over nuances and ignoring complexities. An examination of the latest crop of organizational behavior and international business textbooks revealed that most authors present only Hofstede's cultural dimensions, occasionally supplemented by Hall's theory of high- and low-context cultures.[9] Although these disciplines are not charged with the responsibility of teaching culture in great depth, these are the principal courses in many curricula where business students are exposed to cross-cultural concepts. Another handicap is that many business professors do not receive a thorough grounding in culture in their own disciplines and doctoral programs. One could further argue that we are joined in this conspiracy to give culture a quick-and-dirty treatment by practitioners and students who are looking for ways to simplify and make sense of the world.

The limitations of sophisticated stereotyping become most evident when we confront cultural paradoxes. This is the moment we realize our understanding is incomplete, misleading, and potentially dangerous. Perhaps because cultural paradoxes reveal the limitations in our thinking, they are often left unmentioned, even though virtually anyone with experience in another culture can usually identify one or two after only a moment's reflection.

Why Don't We Know More About Cultural Paradoxes?

With one exception,[10] the cross-cultural literature contains no mention or explanation of cultural paradoxes. This absence can be explained by:

- homegrown perceptual schemas that result in cultural myopia
- lack of cultural experience that leads to misinterpretation and failure to comprehend the entire picture
- cultural learning that plateaus before complete understanding is achieved
- Western dualism that generates theories with no room for paradox or holistic maps
- features of cross-cultural research that encourage simplicity over complexity
- a between-culture research approach that is less likely to capture cultural paradoxes than a within-culture approach.

Perceptual Schemas

When outsiders look at another culture, they inevitably interpret its institutions and customs using their own lenses and schemas; cultural myopia and lack of experience prevent them from seeing all the nuances of another culture.

In particular, a lack of experience with the new culture creates difficulties for new expatriates trying to make sense of what they encounter. The situation is analogous to putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Though one may have the picture on the puzzle box as a guide, making sense of each individual piece and understanding where and how it fits is exceedingly difficult. As more pieces are put into place, however, it is easier to see the bigger picture and understand how individual pieces mesh. Similarly, as one acquires more and varied experiences in the new culture, one can develop an appreciation for how certain attitudes and behaviors fit the puzzle and create an internal logic of the new culture.

The danger with sophisticated stereotyping is that it may lead individuals to think that the number of shapes that pieces may take is limited and that pieces fit together rather easily. As Barnlund notes: "Rarely do the descriptions of a political structure or religious faith explain precisely when and why certain topics are avoided or why specific gestures carry such radically different meanings according to the context in which they appear."[11]

Expatriates and researchers alike tend to focus first on cultural differences and make initial conclusions that are not always modified in light of subsequent evidence.[12] Proactive learning about another culture often stops once a survival threshold is attained, perhaps because of an instinctive inclination to simplify a complex world. This may lead us to seek black-and-white answers rather than tolerate the continued ambiguity that typifies a more complete understanding of another culture.

One of the best descriptions of the peeling away of layers that characterizes deeper cultural under-

standing is found in a fictionalized account of expatriate life written by an expatriate manager, Robert Collins.[13] He outlines ascending levels on a Westerner's perception scale of Japanese culture that alternate, in daisy-petal-plucking fashion, between seeing the Japanese as significantly different or not really that different at all:

> The initial Level on a Westerner's perception scale clearly indicates a "difference" of great significance. The Japanese speak a language unlike any other human tongue . . . they write the language in symbols that reason alone cannot decipher. The airport customs officers all wear neckties, everyone is in a hurry, and there are long lines everywhere.
>
> Level Two is represented by the sudden awareness that the Japanese are not different at all. Not at all. They ride in elevators, have a dynamic industrial/trade/financial system, own great chunks of the United States, and serve cornflakes in the Hotel Okura.
>
> Level Three is the "hey, wait a minute" stage. The Japanese come to all the meetings, smile politely, nod in agreement with everything said, but do the opposite of what's expected. And they do it all together. They really are different.
>
> But are they? Level Four understanding recognizes the strong group dynamics, common education and training, and the general sense of loyalty to the family—which in their case is Japan itself. That's not so unusual, things are just organized on a larger scale than any social unit in the West. Nothing is fundamentally different.
>
> Level Five can blow one's mind, however. Bank presidents skipping through streets dressed as dragons at festival time; single ladies placing garlands of flowers around huge, and remarkably graphic, stone phallic symbols; Ministry of Finance officials rearranging their bedrooms so as to sleep in a "lucky" direction; it is all somewhat odd. At least, by Western standards. There is something different in the air.
>
> And so on. Some Westerners, the old Japan hands, have gotten as far as Levels 37 or 38.[14]

The point of Collins's description is that it takes time and experience to make sense of another culture. The various levels he describes reflect differing levels of awareness as more and more pieces of the puzzle are put into place. Time and experience are essential because culture is embedded in the context. Without context it makes little sense to talk about culture. Yet just as its lower-order counterpart does, sophisticated stereotyping tends to strip away or ignore context. Thus, cognitive schemas prevent sojourners and researchers from seeing and correctly interpreting paradoxical behavior outside their own cultures.

Theoretical Limitations

Another reason for the inattention to cultural paradoxes stems from the intersection between cognitive schemas and theory. Westerners have a tendency to perceive stimuli in terms of dichotomies and dualisms rather than paradoxes or holistic pictures.[15] The idea of paradox is a fairly recent wrinkle on the intellectual landscape of management theorists[16] and has not yet been incorporated into cultural theories in a managerial context.

Cross-cultural research is generally held to be more difficult than domestic studies. Hofstede's[17] work represented a major step forward and launched a deluge of studies utilizing his dimensions. Hundreds of studies have used one or more of Hofstede's dimensions to explore similarities and differences across cultures regarding numerous aspects of business and management. However, Hofstede himself warned against expecting too much of these dimensions and of using them incorrectly. For example, he defended the individualism-collectivism dimension as a useful construct, but then went on to say: "This does not mean, of course, that a country's Individual Index score tells all there is to be known about the backgrounds and structure of relationship patterns in that country. It is an abstraction that should not be extended beyond its limited area of usefulness."[18]

When we fail to specify under what conditions a culture measures low or high on any of the common cultural dimensions, or to take into consideration the impact of organizational culture, it misleads rather than increases our understanding of comparisons of culture and business practices. Such an approach prevents rather than opens up opportunities for learning and exploration.

A final explanation for the failure to address cultural paradoxes can be traced to the emic/etic distinction commonly used in the cultural literature. An emic perspective looks at a culture from within its boundaries, whereas an etic perspective stands outside and compares two or more cultures. To make between-culture differences more promi-

nent, the etic approach minimizes the inconsistencies within a culture. Most cultural approaches in management adopt a between-culture approach, playing down the within-culture differences that expatriates must understand in order to work successfully in the host country.

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss warned that explanation does not consist of reducing the complex to the simple, but of substituting a more intelligible complexity for one that is less intelligible.[19] In failing to acknowledge cultural paradoxes or the complexity surrounding cultural dimensions, we may settle for simplistic, rather than intelligently complex, explanations.

Sources of Paradox in Cultural Behavior

Behavior that looks paradoxical to an expatriate in the initial stages of cultural awareness may simply reflect the variance in behavioral norms for individuals, organizational cultures, subcultures, as well as generational differences and changing sections of the society. In addition, expatriates may also form microcultures[20] with specific members of the host culture. The cultural synergy of such microcultures may not be reflective of the national culture. These false paradoxes need to be discarded before more substantive paradoxes can be evaluated.

Based on an analysis of all the paradoxes we could find, we have identified six possible explanations for cultural behaviors that appear truly paradoxical. They are:

- the tendency for observers to confuse individual with group values
- unresolved cultural issues
- bipolar patterns
- role differences
- real versus espoused values
- value trumping, a recognition that in specific contexts certain sets of values take precedence over others.

Confusing individual with group values is exemplified by the personality dimension labeled allocentrism versus idiocentrism, which is the psychological, individual-level analog to the individualism-collectivism dimension at the level of culture.[21] Allocentric people, those who pay primary attention to the needs of a group, can be found in individualistic cultures, and idiocentric people, those who pay more attention to their own needs than to the needs of others, in collectivist cultures. What we perceive as cultural paradox may not reflect contradictions in cultural values, but instead may reveal the natural diversity within any culture that reflects individual personality and variation.

Unresolved cultural issues are rooted in the definition of culture as a learned response to problems. Some paradoxes come from problems for which there is no clear, happy solution. Cultures may manifest a split personality with regard to an unresolved problem.[22] As a result, they shuttle back and forth from one extreme to the other on a behavioral continuum. U.S. Americans, for example, have ambivalent views about sex, and, as one journalist recently noted: "Our society is a stew of prurience and prudery."[23] Censorship, fears about sex education, and sexual taboos coexist uncomfortably with increasingly graphic films and TV shows and women's magazines that never go to press without a feature article devoted to sex. This melange is more than a reflection of a diverse society that has both hedonists and fundamentalists with differing views of sex; both groups manifest inconsistent behaviors and attitudes about sex, signaling an enduring cultural inability to resolve this issue.

Bipolar patterns make cultural behavior appear paradoxical because cultural dimensions are often framed, perhaps inaccurately, as dualistic, either-or continua. Cultures frequently exhibit one of these paired dimensions more than the other, but it is probable that both ends of the dimensions are found in cultures—but only in particular contexts. For example, in Latin America, ascribed status, derived from class and family background, is more important than its polar opposite, achieved status, which is based on talent and hard work. When it comes to professional soccer, however, achieved status trumps class and ascription.

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Often some groups and roles appear to deviate from cultural stereotypes. For example, in the United States, autocratic behavior is frequently tolerated in CEOs, even though the United States is characterized as an egalitarian culture. Such behavior may also be an example of a high power distance context in a low power distance culture: We accept that CEOs possess an unequal degree of power and that they will behave in a different manner than most U.S. Americans.

There is also a difference between real versus es-

poused values. All cultures express preferences for ideal behaviors—for what should be valued and how people should act. Nevertheless, people do not always act consistently with ideal behaviors and values. For example, U.S. Americans may simultaneously pay lip service to the importance of equality (an espoused value), while trying to acquire more power or influence for themselves (a real value).

A final possible explanation of cultural paradoxes derives from a holistic, contextual view of culture in which values co-exist as a constellation, but their salience differs depending on the situation. Using the Gestalt concept of figure-ground, at times a particular value becomes dominant (figure), while in other circumstances, this same value recedes into the background (ground).[24] In India, for example, collectivism is figural when individuals are expected to make sacrifices for their families or for the larger society—such as Hindu sons who postpone marriage until their sisters marry, or daughters who stay single to care for their parents. In other circumstances, however, collectivism fades into the background and individualism comes to the fore and is figural when Indians focus more upon self-realization—for example, elderly men who detach themselves from their family to seek salvation.[25] Taking the figure-ground analogy a step further, depending on the context, one cultural value might trump another, lessening the influence another value normally exerts.[26] For example, we find it useful to view culture as a series of card games in which cultural values or dimensions are individual cards. Depending on the game, previous play, and the hand one is dealt, players respond by choosing specific cards that seem most appropriate in a given situation. Sometimes a particular card trumps the others; in another round, it does not. In a given context, specific cultural values come into play and have more importance than other values. To a foreigner who does not understand enough about the cultural context to interpret why or when one value takes precedence over another, such behavior looks paradoxical. Members of the culture learn these nuances more or less automatically. For example, children learn in what context a socially acceptable white lie is more important than always telling the truth. A true understanding of the logic of another culture includes comprehending the interrelationships among values, or how values relate to one another in a given context.

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A Model of Cultural Sensemaking

To make sense of cultural paradoxes and convey a holistic understanding of culture, we propose a model of cultural sensemaking. The model shown in Figure 1 helps explain how culture is embedded in context.[27] Cultural sensemaking is a cycle of sequential events:

- **Indexing Context.** The process begins when an individual identifies a context and then engages in indexing behavior, which involves noticing or

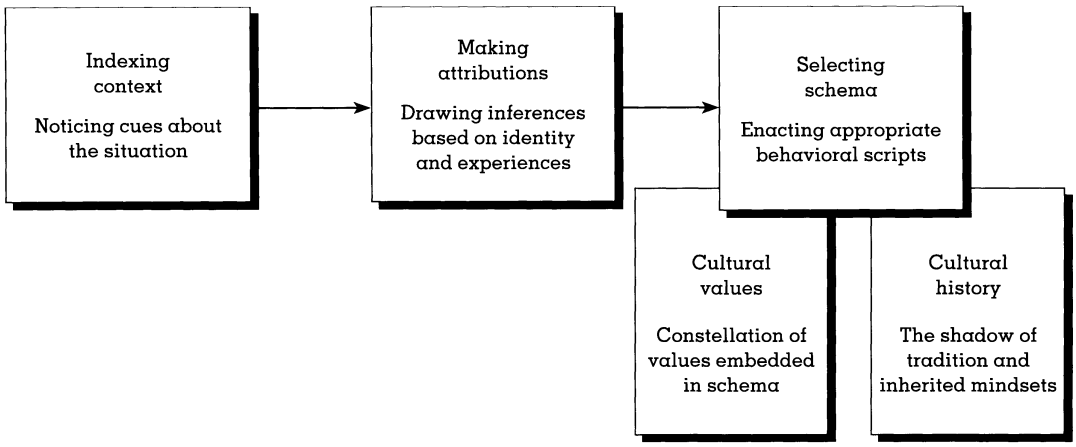

FIGURE 1
Cultural Sensemaking Model

attending to stimuli that provide cues about the situation. For example, to index the context of a meeting with a subordinate, we consider characteristics such as prior events (recent extensive layoffs), the nature of the boss-subordinate relationship within and without work (golfing partner), the specific topic under discussion (employee morale), and the location of the interaction (boss's office).

- **Making Attributions.** The next step is attribution, a process in which contextual cues are analyzed in order to match the context with appropriate schema. The matching process is moderated or influenced by one's social identity (e.g., ethnic or religious background, gender, social class, organizational affiliation) and one's history (e.g., experiences and chronology). A senior U.S. American manager who fought against the Japanese in World War II will make different attributions about context and employ different schema when he meets with a Japanese manager than will a Japanese-American manager of his generation, or a junior U.S. manager whose personal experience with Japan is limited to automobiles, electronics, and sushi.
- **Selecting Schema.** Schemas are cultural scripts, "a pattern of social interaction that is characteristic of a particular cultural group."[28] They are accepted and appropriate ways of behaving, specifying certain patterns of interaction. From personal or vicarious experience, we learn how to select schema. By watching and working with bosses, for example, we develop scripts for how to act when we take on that role ourselves. We learn appropriate vocabulary and gestures, which then elicit a fairly predictable response from others.
- **The Influence of Cultural Values.** Schemas reflect an underlying hierarchy of cultural values. For example, people working for U.S. managers who have a relaxed and casual style and who openly share information and provide opportunities to make independent decisions will learn specific scripts for managing in this fashion. The configuration of values embedded in this management style consists of informality, honesty, equality, and individualism. At some point, however, these same managers may withhold information about a sensitive personnel situation because privacy, fairness, and legal concerns would trump honesty and equality in this context. This trumping action explains why the constellation of values related to specific schema is hierarchical.
- **The Influence of Cultural History.** When decoding schema, we may also find vestiges of cultural history and tradition. Mindsets inherited from previous generations explain how history is remembered.[29] For example, perceptions about a colonial era may still have an impact on schemas, particularly those involving interactions with foreigners, even though a country gained its independence centuries ago.

Some Illustrations of Sensemaking

Sensemaking involves placing stimuli into a framework that enables people "to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict."[30] Let's analyze each of the cultural paradoxes presented in the introduction using the sensemaking model. In the United States, when a charity requests money, when deserving people are in need, or when disaster hits a community (indexing contexts), many U.S. Americans (e.g., religious, allocentric people making attributions) respond by donating their money, goods, or time (selecting schema). The values underlying this schema are humanitarian concern for others, altruism,[31] and collectivism (cultural values). Thus, individualism (a sophisticated stereotype) is moderated by a communal tradition that has its roots in religious and cultural origins (cultural history).

Fukuyama[32] writes that U.S. society has never been as individualistic as its citizens thought, because of the culture's relatively high level of trust and resultant social capital. The United States "has always possessed a rich network of voluntary associations and community structures to which individuals have subordinated their narrow interests."[33] Under normal conditions, one should take responsibility for oneself and not rely on others. However, some circumstances and tasks can overwhelm individual initiative and ingenuity. When that happens, people should help those in need, a lesson forged on the American frontier (cultural history). To further underscore the complexity of culture, in the same contexts noted above, the tax code and prestige associated with philanthropy (cultural history) may be the primary motivations for some citizens (e.g., idiocentric, upwardly ambitious people making attributions) to act charitably (selecting schema), but the value underlying the schema would be individualism.

The Costa Rican example is illustrated in Figure 2. When bank tellers interact with clients (indexing context) many of them (e.g., members of various in-groups, civil servants making attributions) do not greet customers and make eye contact, but concentrate solely on their paperwork (selecting schema). The values that underlie this schema are in-group-out-group behavior[34] and power (cultural

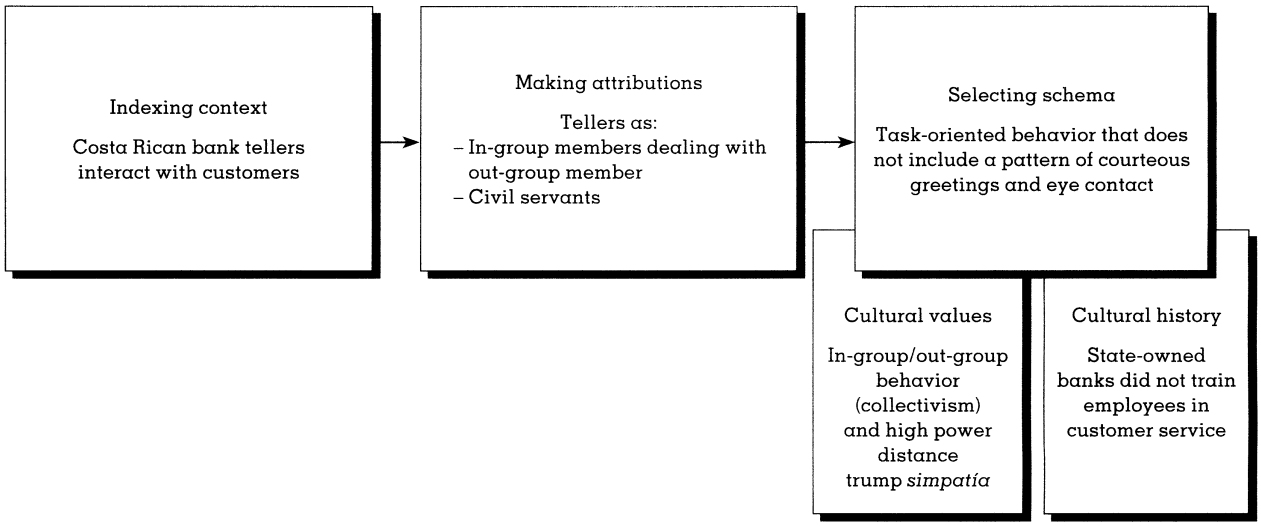

FIGURE 2
Making Sense of Paradoxical Behavior: Seemingly Indifferent Customer Service in a Culture Characterized by Positive, Warm Relations

values). In collectivist cultures such as Costa Rica, members identify strongly with their in-group and treat members with warmth and cooperation. In stark contrast, out-group members are often treated with hostility, distrust, and a lack of cooperation. Customers are considered as strangers and out-group members who do not warrant the special treatment given to in-group members (family and friends). One of the few exceptions to *simpatía* and personal dignity in Costa Rica, and Latin America generally, is rudeness sometimes expressed by people in positions of power.[35] In this context, the cultural value of high power distance (the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally)[36] trumps *simpatía*. Whereas *simpatía* lessens the distance between people, the opposite behavior increases the distance between the powerful and the powerless. Unlike many other contexts in Costa Rica, bank telling does not elicit a cultural script of *simpatía,* and state-owned banks did not have a history of training employees in friendly customer service (cultural history) at this time.

In the third cultural example, when Japanese business people make contracts (indexing context), they (e.g., business people making attributions) opt for ambiguous contracts (selecting schema). The dominant value underlying this schema is collectivism (cultural value). In this context, collectivism is manifested as a belief that those entering into agreement are joined together and share something in common; thus, they should rely on and trust one another. Collectivism trumps high uncertainty avoidance (sophisticated stereotype) in this context, but uncertainty avoidance is not completely absent. Some of the uncertainty surrounding the contract is dealt with upstream in the process by carefully choosing and getting to know business partners, and by using third parties. An additional consideration is that many Japanese like flexible contracts, because they have a greater recognition of the limits of contracts and the difficulties of foreseeing all contingencies (cultural history). Even though U.S. Americans are typically more tolerant of uncertainty (sophisticated stereotype), they value pragmatism and do not like to take unnecessary risks (cultural values). If a deal falls through, they rely on the legal system for a resolution (cultural history).

Working From a Sensemaking Approach

Sophisticated stereotypes are useful in the initial stages of making sense of complex behaviors within cultures. However, rather than stereotyping cultures somewhere along a continuum, we can advance understanding by thinking in terms of specific contexts that feature particular cultural values that then govern behavior. Geertz maintains that "culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has by and large been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what

computer engineers call 'programs')—for the governing of behavior."[37]

Understanding the control mechanisms within a culture requires the acquisition of attributional knowledge, the awareness of contextually appropriate behavior.[38] This is in contrast to factual knowledge and conceptual knowledge. Factual knowledge consists of descriptions of behaviors and attitudes. For example, it is a fact that Japanese use small groups extensively in the workplace. Conceptual knowledge consists of a culture's views and values about central concerns. Sophisticated stereotyping operates in the realm of conceptual knowledge. This category of knowledge is an organizing tool, but it is not sufficient for true cultural understanding. Knowing that the Japanese are a communal society (conceptual knowledge) does not explain the noncommunal activities that exist in Japanese organizations or when the Japanese will or will not be communal. For example, why are quality control circles used in some work settings and not in others? Factual and conceptual knowledge about Japanese culture cannot answer that question; only attributional knowledge can.

Managers can acquire attributional knowledge from personal experience, vicariously from others' experience, and from cultural mentoring. The personal experience method involves carefully observing how people from another culture act and react, and then formulating and reformulating hypotheses and cultural explanations for the observed behavior. When expatriates test their hypotheses and find them valid, they form schemas about specific events in the host culture.

One can learn vicariously by reading about other cultures, but the best form of vicarious learning is via cultural assimilator exercises.[39] These are critical incidents of cross-cultural encounters, accompanied by alternative explanations for the behavior of people from the foreign culture. After choosing what they perceive as the most likely answer, trainees then read expert opinions relating why each answer is adequate or inadequate. These opinions are validated by cross-cultural experts and include information about the relative importance of cultural dimensions or context-specific customs in the culture in question.

A cultural mentor can be viewed as a hybrid of vicarious and personal acquisition of attributional knowledge—a sort of live cultural assimilator. Cultural mentors are usually long-term expatriates or members of the foreign culture. The latter are often helpful souls who have lived abroad themselves and understand the challenge of mastering another culture or people not totally in step with their own culture.[40] "They interpret the local culture for expatriates and guide them through its shoals, as well as providing them with the necessary encouragement when it feels like the expatriates will never 'break the code' of another culture and fit in comfortably."[41] Reading an explanation from a book or working through a series of cultural assimilators is different from receiving an explanation of an experience the expatriate has personally lived through and now wishes to understand. Cultural mentors can correct inaccurate hypotheses about the local culture. Expatriates who had cultural mentors overseas have been found to fare better than those who did not have such mentors: They were more fluent in the foreign language;

Cultural mentors can correct inaccurate hypotheses about the local culture.

they perceived themselves as better adapted to their work and general living conditions abroad; they were more aware of the paradoxes of expatriate life, indicating a higher degree of acculturation and understanding of the other culture; and they received higher performance appraisal ratings from both their superiors and themselves.[42]

In spite of the benefits of mentoring, few multinationals formally assign a cultural mentor to their expatriates. Yet another way of developing an expatriate's attributional knowledge is to provide more training in the host country rather than relying solely on predeparture culture "inoculations."

Admittedly, there are trade-offs to developing attributional knowledge. The acquisition of cultural knowledge takes a good deal of time and energy, which is not available to all managers. Nor is it reasonable to expect employees who work with people from various cultures on a daily basis to master each culture. Nevertheless, organizing the knowledge they do acquire as context-specific schemas can speed up cultural learning and prevent confusion and errors in making sense of cultural paradoxes.

If we accept that cultures are paradoxical, then it follows that learning another culture occurs in a dialectical fashion—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Thesis entails a hypothesis involving a sophisticated stereotype; antithesis is the identification of an apparently oppositional cultural paradox. Synthesis involves making sense of contradictory behavior—understanding why certain values are more important in certain contexts. Behavior appears less paradoxical once the foreigner learns to

index contexts and match them with the appropriate schemas in the same way that members of the host culture do. Collins's description of the Westerner's Perception Scale in comprehending Japanese culture[43] illustrates one form of dialectical culture learning, an upwardly spiraling cycle of cultural comprehension.

Using The Model

Because this cultural sensemaking model provides a more complex way of understanding culture, it has clear implications for those who teach culture, for those who work across cultures, and for organizations that send expatriates overseas.

Teaching About Cultural Understanding

Sophisticated stereotyping should be the beginning of cultural learning, not the end, as is so often the case when teaching or learning about culture. Recognition of a more complex, holistic, sensemaking model of culture allows us to respond more effectively when students or trainees provide examples of paradoxes that seem to contradict cultural dimensions. The model also requires a somewhat different teaching approach. We have developed a sequential method that has been effective in our teaching:

- **Help students understand the complexity of their own culture.** To acquaint students with the vast challenge of comprehending culture, we begin with a thorough understanding of the internal logic of one's own culture and its socioeconomic, political, and historical roots. We add complexity by pointing out paradoxes as well as identifying regional, ethnic, religious, organizational, and individual variations in behavior. For example, when Thai students describe their culture as friendly, we ask the following series of questions: "Are all Thais friendly? Are Thais always friendly? Under what circumstances would Thais not exhibit friendly behavior? Why?"
- **Give students cultural dimensions and values as well as sophisticated stereotypes as basic tools.** These dimensions, including the values listed in Table 1, can then be used to explain contrasting behavior from two or more different cultures (e.g., what can sample obituaries from the United States and Mexico reveal about cultural values? What is the typical response of businesses in both countries when a member of an employee's family dies?). Students practice recognizing cultural dimensions in cross-cultural dialogues and cases and learn sophisticated stereotypes. This helps them gain conceptual knowledge about different cultures so they can make between-culture distinctions.
- **Develop students' skills in cultural observation and behavioral flexibility.** One of the difficulties expatriates confront in making sense of a new culture is the contradiction between the expected culture, the sophisticated stereotype taught in predeparture training or gleaned from others, and the manifest culture, the one actually enacted in a situation.[44] To help students become skilled at observing and decoding other cultures, teach them to think more like anthropologists and give them practice in honing observational and interpretive skills. To help students develop the behavioral flexibility needed to adapt to unanticipated situations, role-playing and videos of cross-cultural interactions can be used.
- **Have students do an in-depth study or experience with one culture.** To go beyond sophisticated stereotypes, students learn the internal logic and cultural history of a single culture. They acquire attributional knowledge from cultural mentors and/or cultural immersion, in addition to extensive research.
- **Focus on learning context-appropriate behavior in other cultures and developing cultural hypotheses and explanations for paradoxical behavior.** Once students have mastered the preceding steps, the emphasis changes to learning schemas for different contexts. For example, student teams are instructed to deliberately demonstrate incorrect behavior; they ask others to point out the mistakes and then replay the scene using correct behavior. To model the crucial behavior of asking for help in understanding cultural mysteries,[45] students use cultural mentors to explain situations they choose to learn about (e.g., "How do managers in _____ encourage employees to perform at high levels? Why does that work for them?") The variation in the mentors' answers ("Some managers are successful doing this while others . . .") and the qualified answers ("This seems to work unless . . .; it depends on . . .") helps students develop more complex understandings of the other culture. To highlight the message of moving beyond cultural stereotypes, use language that focuses on forming and testing hypotheses about contextual behavior: "What are your hypotheses about why a French employee behaves this way in this situation? How can you find out if these hypotheses are correct?"

Sensemaking for Individuals Working Across Cultures

After the training program, and once on assignment in a new culture, this cultural sensemaking approach has other practical implications.

- **Approach learning another culture more like a scientist who holds conscious stereotypes and hypotheses in order to test them.** One of the key differences between managers who were identified by their fellow MBA students as the "most internationally effective" and the "least internationally effective" is that the former changed their stereotypes of other nationalities as they interacted with them while the latter did not.[46]

- **Seek out cultural mentors and people who possess attributional knowledge about cultures.** Perhaps one of the basic lessons of cross-cultural interaction is that tolerance and effectiveness result from greater understanding of another culture. Making sense of a culture's internal logic and decoding cultural paradoxes is easiest with the aid of a willing and knowledgeable informant.

Perhaps one of the basic lessons of cross-cultural interaction is that tolerance and effectiveness result from greater understanding of another culture.

- **Analyze disconfirming evidence and instances that defy cultural stereotypes.** Even people with a great deal of experience in another culture can benefit from analyzing cultural paradoxes. For instance, the question, "In what circumstances do Latin Americans fail to exhibit *simpatía*?" led to a more complex cultural understanding for one of the authors, who had already spent nine curious years in that region. Once expatriates can function reasonably well in another culture, it is easy for them to reach plateaus in their cultural understanding and mistakenly assume that they comprehend the entire puzzle. This presents a danger when expatriates inadvertently pass on inaccurate information about the local culture, or make faulty, and even expensive, business decisions based on partial understandings.
- **Learn cultural schemas that will help you be effective.** Knowing how to act appropriately in specific cross-cultural settings results in self-confidence and effectiveness. One cannot memorize all the rules in another culture, but understanding the values that underlie most schemas can often prevent us from making serious mistakes.

How Multinational Organizations Can Use the Sensemaking Model

The cultural sensemaking model also has practical implications for multinational organizations.

- **Use cognitive complexity as a selection criterion for expatriates and people in international positions.** Avoid black-and-white thinkers in favor of people who exhibit cognitive complexity, which involves the ability to handle ambiguity and multiple viewpoints. This skill is better suited to a thesis-antithesis approach to understanding the paradoxical nature of culture.
- **Provide in-country cultural training for expatriates that goes beyond factual and conceptual knowledge.** Predeparture cultural training is complemented by on-site training, which has the advantage of good timing. In-country culture training takes place when expatriates are highly motivated to find answers to real cultural dilemmas and when they are ready for greater complexity.[47]
- **Gauge the cultural knowledge possessed by expatriates within a country.** The accuracy and depth of one's cultural understanding is not always linked to the time one has spent in another country; it depends on the degree of involvement with the other culture as well as cultural curiosity and desire to learn. Nevertheless, when companies determine the optimum length of overseas assignments, they should consider how much time is generally necessary to function effectively in a particular culture. If a firm's expatriates stay abroad for only two years, it is less likely that a deep understanding of the culture will be shared among them than if they were to stay for longer periods. As long as the longer-term expatriates do not stop at a low-level plateau of cultural learning, mixing short-term (2–3 years) with longer-term expatriates (6–7 years) with permanent expatriates could produce more shared organizational learning about the culture. It is also essential to recognize that expatriates working for the same organization may be at different levels of cultural understanding.
- **Act like learning organizations with regard to cultural knowledge.** Multinationals benefit from formal mechanisms to develop a more complex understanding of the cultures where they do business through such methods as cultural mentors and in-country cultural training. There

should also be mechanisms for sharing cultural knowledge. For example, having returned expatriates give formal debriefing sessions in which they report what they learned in their assignment increases the company's collective cultural knowledge and eases the expatriates' transition home by helping them make sense of a highly significant experience.[48]

Acknowledgment

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Endnotes

[1] This was one of the findings of a class research project on the acceptance of ATMs by Dr. Osland's graduate students at INCAE's (Central American Institute of Business Administration) Banking Program in 1991.

[2] Triandis, J. C., Marin, G., Lisansky, J., & Betancourt, H. 1984. *Simpatía* as a cultural script of hispanics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 47(6): 1363–1375.

[3] Hofstede, G. 1980. *Culture's consequences: International differences in work related values.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

[4] Olmstead v. United States, 277 U.S. 438, 478 (1928) (Brandeis, J., dissenting).

[5] The descriptions of cultural metaphors in *Understanding global cultures: Metaphorical journeys through 17 countries* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994) by Martin Gannon and his associates, contain passing references to paradoxes, but do not address the issue directly.

[6] Parsons, T. & Shils, E. 1951. *Toward a general theory of action.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press; Kluckhohn, F. & Strodtbeck, F. L. 1961. *Variations in value orientations.* Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson; Hofstede, op.cit.; Triandis, H. C. 1982. Dimensions of cultural variations as parameters of organizational theories. *International Studies of Management and Organization,* 12(4): 139–169; Ronen, S. & Shenkar, O. (1985). Clustering countries on attitudinal dimensions: A review and synthesis. *Academy of Management Review,* 10: 435–454; Hall, E. T. & Hall, M. R. 1990. *Understanding cultural differences.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press; Fiske, A. P. 1992. The four elementary forms of sociality: Framework for a unified theory of social relations. *Psychological Review,* 99(4), 689–723; Schwartz, S. 1992. Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology,* 25: 1–66. New York, NY: Academic Press; Trompenaars, F. & Hampden Turner, C. 1993. *The seven cultures of capitalism.* New York: Doubleday.

[7] Hofstede, op. cit.

[8] Adler, N. 1997. *International dimensions of organizational behavior,* 3rd ed. Cincinnati: South-Western, 75–76.

[9] Hall & Hall, op. cit.

[10] Gannon, op. cit.

[11] Barnlund, D. 1975. *Public and private self in Japan and the United States.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 6.

[12] Osland, J. S. 1995. *The adventure of working abroad: Hero tales from the global frontier.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[13] Collins, R. J. 1987. *Max Danger: The adventures of an expat in Tokyo.* Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co.

[14] Ibid., 14–15.

[15] Tripathi, R. C. 1988. *Aligning development to values in India.* In D. Sinha & H. S. R. Kao (Eds.), Social values and development: Asian perspectives: 315–333. New Delhi: Sage.; Wilbur, J. 1995. *A brief history of everything.* New York: Shambala.

[16] Quinn, R. & Cameron, K. S. (Eds.) 1988. *Paradox and transformation.* Cambridge, MA: Ballinger; Smith, K. K. & Berg, D. N. 1987. *Paradoxes of group life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[17] Hofstede, op. cit.

[18] Hofstede, G. 1994. In U. Kim, H. S. Triandis, C. Kâgitçibasi, S. Choi & G. Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and collectivism.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, xi.

[19] Levi-Strauss, C. 1962. *La pensée sauvage.* Paris: Adler's Foreign Books, Inc.

[20] Fontaine, G. 1989. *Managing international assignments: The strategy for success.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[21] Triandis, H. C., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M. J., Asai, M., & Lucca, N. 1988. Individualism and collectivism: Cross-cultural perspectives on self-ingroup relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 54(2): 323–338.

[22] Bateson, G. 1973. *Steps to an ecology of mind.* London: Paladin Books.

[23] Haught, J. 1993. What does sex have to do with it? *Oregonian,* December 29, 1993, D7.

[24] Tripathi, Marin, op. cit.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Bird, A., Osland, J. S., Mendenhall, M., & Schneider, S. 1999. Adapting and adjusting to other cultures: What we know but don't always tell. *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 8(2): 152–165.

[27] Context is also embedded in culture, so one could argue that the entire model is situated within the broader culture. For simplicity's sake, however, we chose to focus only on the sensemaking that occurs in deciphering cultural paradoxes.

[28] Triandis, Marin, et. al., op. cit.

[29] Fisher, G. 1997. *Mindsets: The role of culture and perception in international relations.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

[30] Starbuck, W. H. & Milliken, F. J. 1988. *Executives' personal filters: What they notice and how they make sense.* In D. Hambrick (Ed.), The executive effect: Concepts and methods for studying top managers. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 51.

[31] Barnlund, op. cit.

[32] Fukuyama, F. 1996. *Trust.* New York: Penguin Books.

[33] Ibid., 29.

[34] Triandis, et al., op. cit.

[35] Osland, J. S., De Franco, S., & Osland, A. 1999. Organizational implications of Latin American culture: Lessons for the expatriate manager. *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 8(2): 219–234.

[36] Hofstede, *Culture's consequences,* op. cit.

[37] Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: HarperCollins Basic Books, 44.

[38] Bird, A., Heinbuch, S., Dunbar, R. & McNulty, M. 1993. A conceptual model of the effects of area studies training programs and a preliminary investigation of the model's hypothesized relationships. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 17(4): 415–436.

[39] The original cultural assimilators were developed by Harry Triandis at the University of Illinois. A recent collection is found in *Intercultural interactions: A practical guide,* by R. Brislin, K. Cushner, C. Cherrie, & Yong, M., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1986 and 1996 (second edition).

[40] Osland, *Working abroad,* op. cit.

[41] Ibid., 68.

[42] Ibid., 74.

[43] Collins, op. cit.

[44] Schermerhorn, Jr., J. & Bond, M. H. 1997. Cross-cultural leadership dynamics in collectivism and high power distance settings. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal,* 18(4): 187–193.

[45] On occasion we have heard frustrated cross-cultural trainers grumble that some expatriates view seeking out cultural explanations with the same disdain they reserve for stopping to ask for driving directions.

[46] Ratiu, I. 1983. Thinking internationally: A comparison of how international students learn. *International Studies of Management and Organization,* 13:139–150.

[47] Bird, Osland, et al., op. cit.

[48] Osland, *Working Abroad,* op. cit.

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Executive Commentaries

June Delano
Eastman Kodak Company

I doubt anyone with cross-cultural experience can read Osland and Bird's article without remembering a moment when careful cross-cultural preparation had to be jettisoned. The moment that came to my mind was meeting a Japanese colleague on a visit to the United States. Instead of the formality and reserve I expected, he kicked off his shoes, tucked his feet under him in a chair, and leaned close to me conspiratorially, saying: "So what is it really like here at corporate headquarters?" His behavior made no sense within my "sophisticated stereotype" of Japanese culture, but we nonetheless found common ground and developed a good working relationship. Over time, I came to realize that he was a free spirit whose exuberant personality overrode his cultural group norms.

Osland and Bird's model is helpful in explaining this and other paradoxical experiences, and it looks as if it has broader application than traditional expatriate training. This is important because companies like mine, Kodak, have fewer and fewer true expatriates. Instead, we have people of many nationalities who lead multicultural teams, work on multicountry projects, and travel monthly outside their home countries. In any year, they may work in Paris, Shanghai, Istanbul, Moscow, or Buenos Aires with colleagues from a different set of countries. It is impossible for these global travelers to remember a sophisticated stereotype for each culture they encounter, much less develop a deep understanding of each.

Kodak has also gone beyond traditional cultural training by addressing multiculturalism from a team perspective. In this regard, we developed a workbook for leaders managing global teams. The workbook explains in simple terms the roles of team members and team leaders in different cultures using Hofstede's cultural dimensions of hierarchy/equality, individualism/collectivism, task/relationship, and risk avoidance/risk comfort. But the workbook also offers the following advice, which is consistent with Osland and Bird's thesis:

> Because a team member comes from a country where a particular orientation exists does not mean that she will necessarily embody that orientation. Cross cultural tools are not flawlessly predictive, so be prepared for individual surprises and contradictions.

Along this line, there is one piece of advice in the article I would give greater emphasis to—the caution

to avoid "black-and-white thinkers" for cross-cultural assignments. When a manager asks for the "rules" for operating in a given culture and then accepts them as gospel, I am suspect of his ability to succeed in that culture or any other culture than his own. I do not believe everyone is cut out for cross-cultural work. Kodak screens managers for cross-cultural assignments based on their ability to deal with paradox, conflicting realities, ambiguity and contradiction. Kodak is pessimistic that managers will be able to work effectively in a cross-cultural environment if they do not have these skills.

Kodak is prepared to invest resources in building multicultural proficiency and we have an urgent need to do so. We are currently conducting research on multicultural organization development. If training of our future work force were to reflect the sophistication of Osland and Bird's process for teaching cultural understanding, multinational corporations would have an easier time with global project teams, multicountry product launches and all other activities in today's global environment.

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Mathew Jacob
Currimjee Group

Osland and Bird hit the nail on the head in recognizing the reality of paradox as a central tenet of working in cross-cultural environments. After years of working his this sphere, I have become rather cautious using any form of cross-cultural stereotype. Here are the three rules of thumb I follow when doing so:

1. The complexity of cultures that one encounters does not fall neatly into categories defined by national boundaries. Factors such as the kind of work the persons does, the company the person works for, the sector of work (such as textiles or software or not-for-profit) often override the influence of national culture. For example, whether working with software engineers out of India, the U.S. or Singapore, one will find that common ground is brought by the technology of the work. Similarly, executives from the same company across national boundaries seem to exhibit remarkably similar cultural behaviors. This is particularly true in large multinational companies that have strongly integrated value systems.

2. The complexity of cultures and their apparent inherent contradictions make stereotypes difficult to decipher. Stereotyping takes place intuitively and in retrospect. In reality, a number of possible explanations can be found to explain the behavior of a particular individual or collective behavior, and not all of them fit into stereotypes. One experience that brought this home to me occurred when I taught courses for Texas Instruments in the Asia-Pacific region. The primary requirement of the Indian participants in these training sessions was the clarity of concepts. In Singapore, the participants were more interested in specific how-to's. On the surface, this fit in well with the stereotypes that are typically held about India and Singapore—philosophical versus action-oriented, respectively. But on further reflection it became obvious that the differences in the two groups might also have been because the participants from India were software developers while those from Singapore were from a manufacturing environment, or because the participants from Singapore were familiar with some of the ideas taught, while for the Indian group they were new. In practice, both groups displayed equal facility with concepts and actions.

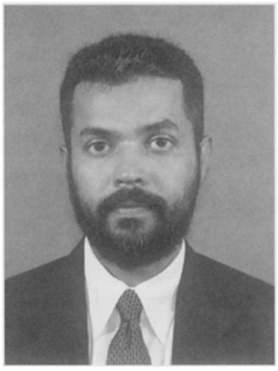
3. Words are imprecise. That is, words are limited in their ability to actually explain the dynamics of a situation and are subject to multiple interpretations depending on who is doing the interpreting.

What May Work

The reality of today's world is that at one level there is an increasing acceptance of diverse forms of expression. On another, there seems to be an

exponential growth in what may be called common ground across cultures. As a result, cross-cultural training has become simpler and more difficult all at once.

What is needed in cross-cultural training is not sophisticated stereotypes but the skills to be sensitive to differences and to recognize cultural as a dynamic process rather than a static set of attributes. Consequently, training for expatriate assignments needs to focus more on essentials like etiquette and protocol, interpersonal sensitivity, and the capacity to reflect, rather than revolve around a list of cultural characteristics. The key to operating in cross-cultural environments today lies in being sensitive to the subtle nuances of people and situations, and finding the vast common ground that exists across cultures.



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