Abstract

Within the field of intercultural relations, there is currently a debate regarding the validity of the concept of culture and the usefulness of categories of cultural comparison. Scholars have increasingly argued that the concept of “culture” may be increasingly irrelevant due to globalization. Others have argued that cultural background is a poor indicator or how someone will behave in a particular situation. In addition, categories of cross-cultural comparison, such as individualism/collectivism have been criticized as unreliable. In spite of these criticisms, describing and understanding cultural difference is a cornerstone of intercultural education and training. This can create a confusing gap between intercultural theory and the lived experience of those crossing cultural boundaries. This article will examine these criticisms, look at different ways that culture has been conceptualized, and examine how competing conceptualizations can create a gap between theory and experience. It will attempt to resolve apparent contradictions and bring clarity to the debate.

It will be argued that much confusion is caused by a failure to distinguish between differing views of culture, including: 1) culture as a form of personal or social identity, 2) culture as something that influences behavior, and 3) culture as shared meaning that acts as framework for interaction—referred to here as deep culture. Though these views are not mutually exclusive, not distinguishing clearly between them is said to lead to misunderstandings in debate about the validity of culture as a concept, and the importance of cultural difference in general. Competing conceptualizations of culture will be reviewed. Cross-cultural research will also be examined. It will be argued that research methodology which tries to measure cultural difference as an independent variable may encourage a view of culture simply as something that influences behavior. This is contrasted with a view of cultural difference as representing differing logics for resolving dilemmas of social organization. This article will argue that viewing culture as frameworks of interpreting interaction, rather than as something that influences behavior, is a more productive approach to understanding culture in the context of intercultural experiences.
Doubts About Cultural Difference

At the core of the field of intercultural relations lies the often unspoken assumption that culture exists as an important element of human affairs and that understanding cultural difference is a key to improved intercultural relationships. An increasing number of specialists, however, are raising questions about the fundamental validity of the concept of culture and our ability to make generalized statements about cultural difference. This is not an attack from the outside. It consists of anthropologists who argue that culture is an obsolete concept, linguists who argue for a universal language instinct (discounting linguistic relativism), communication specialists who say that how we speak is not a reflection of our cultural background, and cross-cultural researchers who suggest that cultural difference at the national level is invalid (Agar, 2002; Brown, 1991; Kramsch, 2005; Matsumoto, 2006a, 2006b; Pinker, 1994; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Shweder, 2000).

There is some irony in this, since as the world becomes increasingly globalized and multicultural, ever greater numbers of people are learning about culture and cultural difference. For example, intercultural training and education often use critical incidents which highlight salient features of cultural difference. Categories of cultural difference, such as individualism/collectivism, high/low context are becoming widely known, and intercultural training simulates cross-cultural encounters to highlight awareness of the importance of cultural differences. More broadly, the idea that behavior abroad needs to be culturally appropriate has become increasingly accepted. It seems that just as intercultural issues become important in the lives of many millions of people, some intercultural theoreticians are increasingly less accepting of culture or cultural difference as valid concepts.

This debate is occurring at a time of contradictory trends. Even as globalization reduces the overall level of cultural distance and isolation in the world, increasing numbers of people are having intercultural experiences. On the one hand, a British traveler in Nepal can read a London newspaper in an Internet café in Katmandu and make a free Internet phone call to a friend in South Africa. On the other hand, the fact that this traveler is in Nepal—something highly exotic 50 years ago—means that he is coming into contact with people who, despite globalization, lead very different lives from his or her own. Ethnic friction has not disappeared because of greater interconnectivity, and indeed some argue that increased intercultural contact exacerbates conflict and may be leading to a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996).

It can be difficult to disentangle the various strands of this debate. Often, critiques come from different fields and emphasize arguments intended for differing academic contexts. There are also hidden assumptions behind how terminology is used. This article will attempt to summarize some of the criticisms of culture and cultural
difference and bring some clarity to this debate. It will argue that at the root of many criticisms of “culture” is confusion between different ways to talk about and view culture and cultural difference. We will discuss the view of culture as: 1) a form of personal or social identity, 2) an internalized quality that influences individual behavior (referred to here as “culture-as-influence view”), and: 3) out-of-awareness patterns that serve as frameworks for interaction in cultural communities (referred to as the deep culture view). These varying approaches are not mutually exclusive but they represent different frameworks used to analyze culture as a lived phenomena. The view of culture as identity can be seen, for example, in debate about multiculturalism. The culture-as-influence view is clearly represented in much of the cross-cultural research that attempts to quantify cultural difference. The deep culture view has been used to articulate the ways in which belonging to particular linguistic and cultural communities implies participation in different worldviews. It will be argued, however, that viewing culture as something that “influences” behavior can lead to difficulties. It will also be argued that better understanding these different ways of talking about cultural difference can lead to quite different views of intercultural interaction.

The History of Cultural Difference

The field of intercultural relations has long given great importance to cultural difference. In the 1930s and 40s, as an attack on racial determinism, anthropologists such as Boas (1928), Benedict (1934), and Mead (1961), as well as linguists such as Sapir (1958), and Whorf (Carrol, 1956) argued powerfully that the customs, social structures, religious practices and values found around the world represented more than different stages on a path towards “development,” but were systematic and self-contained worldviews that were as valid and valuable as those of the “civilized” societies of more industrialized countries. These scholars described culture as a powerful binding force of shared values, products, and practices that is relatively stable. Culture difference, it was felt, can help us learn about human potential and teach us lessons not only about far off places, but about our own societies.

In the 1950s, the work of Edward Hall (1959; 1976; 1984)—the first person to use the term intercultural communication—began exploring the problems encountered when people from different cultural groups attempt to communicate with each other. He was especially interested in how out-of-awareness cultural differences created misunderstanding despite good intentions on both sides. Rather than focus on cosmology and social structures, Hall attempted a systematic description of cultural difference that influences communication and social relations. Fundamental to Hall’s approach was the idea that cultural difference creates often intractable conflict when people from different cultural communities try to accomplish tasks together. For Hall, overcoming the hidden barriers of cultural difference is a primary and fundamental challenge for all humankind.

Hall’s work inspired a great deal of activity among those interested in culture and cultural difference. Scholars such as Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and Geertz SHAULES, JOSEPH 117
(1973) created influential definitions of culture, and many others followed suit. Soudijn, Hutschemaekers, and Van de Vijver (1990) did an analysis of more than 100 varying definitions of culture found in the literature, determining that there are a limited number of core semantic dimensions. Following Hall’s lead, some researchers attempted to systematically describe the salient features of cultural difference. Kluckholm and Strodtbeck (1961) elaborated the concepts of individualism and collectivism. Later researchers, such as Hofstede (1980; 1983; 1997), created new categories to describe cultural difference. Work of this sort continues today (Hanges & Dickson, 2004). In broader society, the idea that cultural difference is an important element in international relations and cross-cultural understanding is widely accepted. This can be seen in the widespread knowledge and use of terms such as culture shock, cultural diversity, and multiculturalism. International companies now routinely provide intercultural communication training for employees or expatriates, and some companies even advertise their local knowledge as proof of their intercultural competence.

Globalization and Criticisms of Culture

Despite this rich tradition of intercultural communication studies, there is an increasing number of specialists who argue that globalization is rendering the concept of culture obsolete. This criticism comes from a variety of fields and seems to be gaining increasing acceptance. The anthropologist Agar (2002), for example, argues that:

The “culture” part of the terms “transcultural” is now a major problem. For most anyone today, the “cultures” that affect him/her at any given moment are multiple, local to global, partial and variable in their impact. Culture used to be a way to describe, generalize and explain what a person was doing. It is not so easy—maybe even impossible—to do that any more. (p. 15)

Agar’s view is not rare. As Shweder (2000) states, “there are plenty of anthropologists (the post-culturalists) who want to disown the concept of culture” (p. 162). This position is taken not only because globalization has broken down so many cultural barriers, but because some feel that the concept is used to defend repressive social arrangements, such as authoritarian governments and oppression of women. Some educators argue that rather than focusing on cultural difference, we should encourage “global awareness” and a sense of identity that goes beyond national boundaries and ethnicity (Cates, 1997; Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

Within the expanding field of cultural studies, there is intense debate about the nature of identity in the postmodern world. There is currently a particular emphasis on issues such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, politics, media, and how values interact in the context of globalization to produce highly fragmented patterns of self-identification (Friedman, 1994; McGuigan, 1999; Sherbert, Gerin, & Petty, 2006; Singer, 1968). Indeed the concept of cultural identity itself is being called into question as globalization both fragments geographically based cultural communities, and unites like-minded individuals who come from disparate regions with very different cultural heritages (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). These changes draw attention to the fact that the
foundational insights of culture and cultural difference were created when it was still possible to study isolated cultural groups with self-contained social systems. The globalized world has ended that era and, in the view of some, brought us into a post-cultural world.

The argument that cultural communities are so individualized and fragmented as to render the concept of culture invalid is also found in the field of communication. Kramsch (2005) states that “to assume that ‘German culture’ speaks through the discourse of a speaker of standard German is an inappropriate assumption in our days of hybrid, changing, and conflicting cultures…(C)ulture has become, for many speakers, a deterritorialized, imagined community” (p. 15). Scollon and Scollon (2001) feel that the word culture often brings up more problems than it solves. These scholars reject the idea that members of a given linguistic community follow the communication patterns of an abstract “typical” native speaker, since each individual has an idiolect which represents a unique expression of their personality and values. In the same way, it is argued that we cannot describe the “typical” values of Germans, Ghanans, or any other cultural community since the individual variety of values within a population goes beyond any generalized attempt to describe them.

Even as some question the concept of culture on the grounds that cultural communities are highly fragmented, others have argued that commonality across languages and cultures is more important than any differences that might be found at either the individual or the community level. Pinker (1994), a linguist, argues against linguistic and cultural relativism, positing a “language instinct” which underlies any superficial differences in language type. Brown (1991) has reviewed ethnographic descriptions of culture and has gone so far as to produce what he argues is a blueprint for what he calls “Universal People.” These authors question whether a focus on difference is productive, particularly in an increasingly globalized world.

**Culture’s Influence at the Individual Level**

One source of the criticisms of culture presented here relates to the macro forces of globalization and the changing relationship between the individual and social communities. Another source of criticisms of culture and cultural difference has its roots in the attempts of researchers (particularly from the field of social psychology or cross-cultural psychology) to understand how culture influences behavior at the micro level of individual behavior. The underlying premise of this approach to understanding cultural difference is that if culture is a valid concept in psychological terms, we should be able to measure its influence in the behavior of individuals who belong to particular cultural groups by using psychometric instruments.

Matsumoto (2006b) has argued that some of the widely accepted assertions about cultural differences at the national level are not supported by empirical research. He focuses in particular on a category of cultural comparison—individualism versus collectivism—that has been widely studied. (For an overview of this research see Triandis, 1995). He argues, for example, that the widely accepted notion that Japanese are collectivist relative to North Americans may not be true. He supports
this claim with a wide range of empirical research (Matsumoto, 2006; Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Shuper, Sorrentino, Otsubo, Hodson, & Walker, 2004). According to Matsumoto, culture at the national level is a dynamic, shifting construct that is a poor predictor of behavior. He argues that culture and cultural worldviews may be little more than verbal descriptions that may or may not be related to what people actually do (Matsumoto, 2006).

Another area of doubt raised by Matsumoto is related to the idea of self-construals. Markus and Kitayama (1998) have argued that a fundamental difference between collectivistic and individualistic cultural values lies in how they influence the way in which individuals conceive of their own identity. In this view, collectivists have a more interdependent sense of self, and individualists have a sense of self that is abstracted across a wide range of different contexts. Matsumoto argues, however, that any given individual has differing types of self-construals and that differing self-construals are found among people of differing cultures. In addition, research shows that people change their self-construal and behavior depending on context (Matsumoto et al., 1997).

Another criticism raised about cultural difference at the national level relates to the possibility that behavioral difference is caused not by culture but by personality. Matsumoto (2006a), for example, draws this conclusion after studying emotion regulation across cultures, specifically between Americans and Japanese. He uses as support psychological research done by Allik and McCrae (2004), which uses cluster analysis to show how different personality types are distributed geographically. Their results showed that personality types do cluster geographically. While the reason for this phenomena may be cultural, there isn’t empirical evidence to show this. In a general sense, individual variation within a cultural population raises a fundamental question about cultural difference: since clearly not all people from a given cultural group have the same attitudes and behaviors, and since individual behavior depends so much on context and personality, what significance can abstract categories of cultural comparison have at the national level?

It would be an exaggeration to say that the criticisms described here represent a majority view within the field of intercultural relations or cross-cultural psychology. They do, however, raise serious questions about how we conceptualize culture and how we measure cultural difference. At stake is not the question of whether cultural difference exists—few would argue that it doesn’t—but rather how best to describe it in a way that is meaningful in our increasingly globalized world.

Cultural Difference and the Experiential Dilemma

The criticisms of research which purports to show cultural difference at the national level raise a difficult question: If empirical cross-cultural research does not show clear patterns of cultural influence of behavior, then why is it that for many sojourners, grappling with cultural difference is such a powerful part of the intercultural experience? How can we reconcile criticisms of cultural difference that are
based on quantitative cross-cultural research with the experience of culture difference that many sojourners find so real and meaningful? Culture shock, cross-cultural misunderstanding, the relationship between language and cultural worldviews—these are clearly powerful elements of intercultural adaptation and learning. Few would argue that cultural difference doesn’t exist in some form, and for those crossing cultural boundaries it often is a defining element of their experience. Those who have lived abroad know from experience that doing business in Bangkok is different from doing it in Baltimore. And if one is speaking a new language abroad, being effective requires not only learning vocabulary and grammar but understanding something of the worldview of the people that use that language. Business strategies and national policies based on ethnocentric assumptions can be shown to fail. Examples of cross-cultural misunderstanding abound. So how can we reconcile this experiential dilemma of lived experience versus conceptual argumentation?

Conflicting Conceptualizations of Culture

As we have seen, some scholars argue that culture is no longer a viable concept in the context of a globalizing world, and others have argued that culture at the national level is a poor predictor of individual behavior. There are, however, some important distinctions which are easily overlooked. We will examine distinctions between: 1) culture as a personal, ethnic, or social identity; 2) culture as a form of socialization that influences behavior; and 3) culture as a symbolic system, a framework of shared meaning that allows for interaction. These contrasting views are not contradictory but neither should they be confused with one another. None of them is more “true” than any other. Yet many of the contradictory claims in the debate about cultural difference can be resolved if these distinctions are kept clear.

When Kramsch (1998), for example, argues that “(C)ulture has become, for many speakers, a deterritorialized, imagined community” (p. 15), she seems to be referring to culture primarily as a form of identity. In an important sense, we belong to communities that we identify with and simply growing up in a particular place doesn’t guarantee that one will identify with the majority cultural groups there. This is certainly true for ethnic minorities. We also find, for example, immigrant children caught between the values and identity of their parents and of the society that they were raised in. To describe the children of Pakistani immigrants to England simply as “British” would not do justice to their sense of self. In this sense, our globalized world is creating many millions of people who have very complex cultural identities that do not fit neatly into cross-cultural comparison categories.

We must keep in mind, however, that the use of the word “culture” to mean an individual’s sense of cultural or ethnic identity, while understandable in the context of multiculturalism, overlooks the largely unconscious cultural frameworks that enable social interaction. One’s sense of cultural identity is not the same thing as the frameworks of shared meanings necessary to function in a particular cultural context. A black American may identify strongly with Africa, for example, but when visiting Senegal for the first time he or she will still be a cultural outsider. As with any other
American, it will take time to learn Wolof, and understand Senegalese values, customs, social relations, food, communication styles, and so forth. Likewise, a Korean citizen who was raised in Japan may feel a strong sense of Korean cultural identity without ever having lived in Korea or knowing how to speak Korean. The children of Pakistani immigrants in England, on the other hand, may not feel a strong English identity, yet they will understand the linguistic and cultural codes needed to interpret the behavior of the English.

For those crossing cultural boundaries, while cultural difference may challenge an individual’s cultural identity, an arguably more important element of the intercultural experience is learning to deal with the hidden, unconscious elements of cultural difference. The process of growing up in a particular cultural environment provides us with the most fundamental frameworks of shared meaning that underlie our conceptual reality. The most obvious example of this is language—our native language acts as the framework that we use to interact with the people we have been raised around. The norms, values, and social expectations of the communities that we participate in are internalized to the point that they become second nature. This hidden side of culture is often overlooked until we go abroad. We face challenges abroad not primarily because of our cultural identity but because we have trouble interpreting the behavior of our cultural hosts. Though certainly not everyone in a given cultural community acts the same way, they share systematic expectations about how to interpret behavior contextually. Not all Japanese bow in the same way or at the same time, but the understanding that bowing shows deference and is expected in certain situations is widely shared. It is this “grammar” of expectations about what bowing means that allows individuals to express themselves in a way that is widely understood by others in the community. And it is these hidden meanings and expectations that form the challenge of intercultural learning.

Shaules (in press) has argued that confusing these different meanings of culture can lead to an overestimation of cultural similarity. It may be true that, for example, teenagers from very different places, say Iran and Peru, may share elements of common cultural identity. They may see themselves as rebels, lovers of rock music, and may have similar characters in an online video game. Yet the Iranian teenager would be incompetent to perform many of the most fundamental tasks that the Peruvian teenager takes for granted—such as speaking Spanish, shopping in a local store, interacting with Peruvian friends, and so on. To feel a particular cultural identity is one thing—to function in another cultural environment is another. This isn’t to say that Iranian and Peruvian teenagers do not share more than they have in the past—they certainly do. Despite this, however, they function in vastly different linguistic and social realities.

Although viewing culture as a shared framework of meaning may sometimes be overshadowed in the debate about globalization, it is not new. It is widely represented in sociology and social psychology, particularly in social constructivist theory, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. These fields help us to understand the ways in which reality is a constructed phenomena. This construction forms the basis of human interaction within communities. Within the field of intercultural relations, Shaules (2006) refers to these frameworks as deep culture. This term is often used
simply to mean the hidden or implicit side of culture, but is used by Shaules to emphasize the degree to which these interpretive frameworks function out of awareness.

One common image used to discuss deep culture is the iceberg, with much of culture hidden below the surface. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) have elaborated on this image and argued that deep culture can be seen in systematic terms of underlying values, norms, and hidden assumptions. Shaules’ use of the term builds on these assumptions and argues that: 1) deep culture provides an interpretive framework which unifies cultural communities in spite of variation in individual behavior or cultural identity, 2) it functions primarily out of awareness, 3) it contains hidden cultural logics that reflect varying orientations to human-relation dilemmas (which can be understood in systematic ways), and that 4) deep culture underpins the perceptual realities shared by cultural communities.

While the term deep culture may be used differently by different authors, this basic approach to understanding cultural difference can be traced back to the early views of linguistic relativism. As Sapir (1958) says: “The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (p. 69). Early interculturalists such as Edward Hall emphasized the unconscious nature of shared cultural frameworks. According to Hall, the most difficult element of cultural difference to overcome is the out-of-awareness expectations of what is considered normal. Just as a fish is not aware of water, we are not aware of the ways in which cultural frameworks form the foundation of our everyday experience. As Hall explains:

Theoretically, there should be no problem when people of different cultures meet. Things begin, most frequently, not only with friendship and goodwill on both sides, but there is an intellectual understanding that each party has a different set of beliefs, customs, mores, values, or what-have-you. The trouble begins when people have to start working together, even on a superficial basis. Frequently, even after years of close association, neither can make the other’s system work!...Man must now embark on the difficult journey beyond culture, because the greatest separation feat of all is when one manages to gradually free oneself from the grip of unconscious culture. (1976, pp. 239–240)

The hidden culture which Hall is referring to seems to be less focused on of late. Nevertheless, the idea that shared meaning acts as the fundamental building blocks of social interaction has not been lost. Bennett (1998), for example, describes the shared meaning of social communities as consisting of shared interaction:

Analysis at a high level of abstraction provides a view of the “unifying force” of culture. The very existence of interaction, even through media, generates a commonality that spans individuals and ethnicities. For instance, despite their significant individual and ethnic differences, Mexicans spend more time interacting with other Mexicans than they do with Japanese. They certainly spend more time reading Mexican newspapers and watching Mexican television than they do consuming Japanese media. This fact generates Mexican “national character”—something that distinguishes Mexicans from Japanese (and from other Latin Americans as well). (1998, p. 4)
Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) have developed these ideas into an approach to understanding cultural difference. They describe the interactive role of shared frameworks of meaning by saying:

Social interaction, or meaningful communication, presupposes common ways of processing information among the people interacting... The mutual dependence of the actors is due to the fact that together they constitute a connected system of meanings: a shared definition of a situation by a group. (p. 20)

While no single term has been agreed upon to represent this “shared frameworks” or deep culture view, understanding how this view contrasts with other uses of the term culture may help us avoid some confusion about cultural issues in the age of globalization.

**Culture’s Influence on Behavior**

We have seen that culture means very different things when it refers to issues of social identity and to shared frameworks of meaning. Another point of contention related to culture is the argument that culture does not control our behavior, and thus is of limited value as a concept. When Agar (2002), for example, argues that “cultures that affect (one) at any given moment are multiple, local to global, partial and variable in their impact” (p. 15), he seems to be saying that we can not predict the causal “impact” of culture. This view of culture as something that impacts or influences behavior is quite different from the view of those, such as Hall, who emphasize the idea that culture acts as a lens which we use to see things, rather than something that affects what we will do. In spite of broad acceptance of this view in general, the view of culture as a causal or influencing agent is deeply embedded in the discourse of cross-cultural research. Hofstede (1997), an influential cross-cultural researcher, explains culture in part by saying:

> Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime. As soon as certain patterns of thinking, feeling and acting have established themselves within a person’s mind, (S)he must unlearn these before being able to learn something different... It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. (pp. 4–5)

This view describes culture as a relatively fixed internal quality which determines “patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting,” that is, influencing how we react to our environment and what our behavior is. This view is also reflected in statements by Hofstede (1997) such as “The main message is that you and I have a culture and that people who were brought up elsewhere have cultures” (p. 232).

Hofstede doesn’t seem to be arguing that culture pre-determines behavior. But clearly he feels that one’s cultural programming influences behavior. I will refer to the view of culture as an internal quality that influences us as the culture-as-influence view. This assumption is shared by other social psychologists. Matsumoto and Juang (2004), in describing how cross-cultural psychologists reduce the concept of culture into elements that can be studied quantitatively, refers to dimensions of cultural dif-
ference as “general tendencies that affect behavior and reflect meaningful aspects of cultural variability” (p. 46). This view of culture as an independent variable to be identified empirically by quantitative research creates some problems, however. As critics of cross-cultural research have pointed out, behavior is highly contextual, and depends on the personality and idiosyncratic characteristics of each individual. The distinction between deep culture and culture-as-influence allows us to see that difficulty in measuring culture’s influence on behavior doesn’t imply that culture difference doesn’t exist or isn’t meaningful. Japanese and American young people may, for example, both wear similar fashion or espouse certain common values, such as individualism. Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean that Japanese young people interact with each other just like American young people do, nor does it imply that Japanese and Americans share the same perceptual world.

The idea that culture influences behavior—as opposed to the idea that culture provides a framework for interpreting behavior—can also be seen as an attempt to identify “essential elements” of culture. The idea that if something is real it can be reduced to component parts which interact in predictable ways is a cornerstone of Western thinking and the scientific method. Nisbitt (2003) has argued that this way of explaining interaction is a particularly Western conceptualization. This can lead to a “fundamental attribution error” (p. 123), an overemphasis on causality in one’s view of human behavior. This is not to say that Westerners are limited to “Newtonian” thinking. It is widely recognized that complex phenomena do not always lend themselves to this kind of analysis. Nevertheless it may be that Western academics have a cultural tendency to approach problem solving in this way and that this influences the debate about the existence of cultural difference. Beyond this, within the field of psychology, there are those who argue more generally that internal psychological qualities are a poor predictor of specific behavior (Kraus, 1995; LaPiere, 1934; Wicker, 1969). If so, it’s understandable that sharing deep culture frameworks does not guarantee particular behaviors.

Cross-Cultural Research and Categories of Cultural Difference

Cross-cultural research has played an important role in how we view the nature of cultural difference. And differences in conceptualizations of culture can affect cross-cultural research methodology, which can in turn affect intercultural training and education. Quantitative research methodology in the social sciences often attempts to identify independent variables in order to show an association between particular phenomena. For example, increased illegal drug use in a given population might be associated with a higher incarceration rate even when other factors are taken into consideration. While this doesn’t mean that drug use causes a higher incarceration rate, research may be able to show a clear and compelling relationship between the two. When quantitative research that attempts to measure cultural difference is carried out in this way, it can be seen as an attempt to isolate meaningful components of culture. Attempting to quantify culture in this way can be seen as a tendency towards a culture-as-influence view.
Geert Hofstede has carried out influential research into cultural value dimensions (1980, 1983, 1997; Hofstede & Spangenberg, 1984). He shares with many researchers the goal of associating particular behaviors to categories of cultural difference. For example, he asked IBM employees in more than 60 countries to choose qualities that would represent the ideal job, and after performing factor analysis on the results, he discovered that certain items correlated with others. For example, those who valued 1) earnings also tended to value 2) recognition, 3) advancement, and 4) challenge. Those who valued 1) relationships also tended to value 2) cooperation, 3) desirable living areas, and 4) security. Extrapolating from these findings and borrowing concepts from social psychology, Hofstede labelled the clusters of answers. In the case of the list above, he labelled the first set of answers masculinity and postulates that they contrast with the second set of answers, which he labelled femininity. These orientations are then considered a category of cultural comparison that represents two ends of an axis of contrasting cultural values.

Table 1 contains some of the dimensions of cultural difference identified by Hofstede (1997) in research related to cultural difference in the workplace. The assumption is that individuals who come from cultures that share particular cultural characteristics will reflect those characteristics in their choices. That is, their culture will affect their behavior in predictable ways.

One problem with conceptualizing and measuring culture in this way is that while on the macro level it may be possible to show statistical correlations between

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<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Measured traits associated with orientation</th>
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<td>Power distance</td>
<td>How cultures handle inequality—the emotional distance between those of differing status</td>
<td>1) Employee fear of expressing disagreement</td>
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<td>2) Superiors have autocratic or paternalistic style</td>
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<td>Individualism: ties between individuals are loose, each looks after oneself</td>
<td>3) Preference for autocratic or paternalistic style</td>
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<td>Collectivism and individualism</td>
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<td>Collectivism: ties are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups</td>
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<td>3) use of skills</td>
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<td>Masculinity and femininity</td>
<td>Masculinity=assertive, competitive, tough</td>
<td>Masculinity=desire for</td>
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<td>Femininity=nurturance, focus on relationships and living environment</td>
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<td>3) desirable living area</td>
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<td>4) employment security</td>
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</table>

national groups and certain value orientations, there is a high degree of individual variation within any sample. No individual represents a “typical” case, and many individuals will choose behaviors that go against that which might be considered typical.

We have seen, however, that viewing culture’s influence on behavior (or more accurately, which behaviors are associated with membership in particular cultural groups) is only one way to approach the issue of culture and cultural difference. The cultural comparison research of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998, 2000, 2004), for example, seems to fit more closely the deep culture view. Rather than associate particular behaviors with membership in a cultural community, they describe internal logics used by cultural groups to explain their value choices. They propose that all cultural communities must find solutions to fundamental dilemmas of social organization, namely 1) relationships between people, 2) how people relate to time, and 3) how people relate to the environment. These can be represented as in Table 2.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner put less emphasis on culture residing within the individual. Instead, cultural values involve logics (in the sense of a systematic approach to viewing something) that underlie social interaction. They are considered dilemmas because they represent opposing solutions to problems of social organization. For example, in any group there will always be a potential conflict between the needs and expectations of the group as a whole and the needs and desires of the indi-

### Table 2 Value Orientations of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value dimension</th>
<th>Dilemma type</th>
<th>Dilemma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>universal vs. particular</td>
<td>relationships between people</td>
<td>Should behavior be regulated with universal rules or an emphasis on particular context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individualism vs. communitarianism</td>
<td>relationships between people</td>
<td>Which contributes more to the common good? Emphasizing the development of the individual even at the expense of the group or emphasizing the well-being of the group even at the expense of the individual?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affective vs neutral specific vs. diffuse</td>
<td>relationships between people</td>
<td>Should emotion be expressed freely or controlled? Should we separate our lives into different realms or compartments or not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>status from achievement vs. performance</td>
<td>relationships between people</td>
<td>Should status be awarded based on standards of achievement defined by the individual or standards that are formally recognized by society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time orientations internal or external control</td>
<td>relationship between people and time</td>
<td>Does time follow a discrete, linear progression, or is it cyclical and adaptable to the needs of particular events? Are humans fundamentally in control of nature and their own destiny, or is fate beyond human control?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individuals who make up that group. In Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s view, cultural groups develop differing, yet equally functional, solutions to these dilemmas.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s research methodology involves presenting a statement or scenario that encapsulates the different sides of the dilemma in question and then asking people from different cultural groups which they agree with. For example, one might ask whether one agrees more with the statement a) to be happy we must all take care of each other, or b) to be happy we must all be free (individualism vs. communitarianism). The goal of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is arguably less focused on measuring the essential qualities which affect particular behaviors. Rather, their work attempts to help intercultural learners understand the underlying logic of other cultural worldviews. Their categories of cultural difference represents a cognitive tool to help interpret behavior in a new environment rather than a label to define groups or associate cultural values with particular behavior. This approach is more consistent with the deep culture view of culture as frameworks of meaning and interpretation.

Implications for Intercultural Education

The criticisms of culture and cultural difference outlined in this article have serious implications for intercultural education and training. In the first place, clear conceptualizations allow practitioners to avoid misstating or confusing the nature of cultural difference. They also allow practitioners to respond to criticisms and questions that mix the varying uses of these terms. Some people, for example, resist generalizations about culture on the grounds that “individuals are all different.” With clear cultural conceptualizations we can better explain that just as people who share a language don’t always say the same things, sharing culture doesn’t mean people act the same way. If a trainee says that as a “citizen of the world” cultural difference isn’t a problem for him, we can try to show him that identifying oneself as a citizen of the world (culture as identity) doesn’t automatically give you the skills and experience to see the world from the point of view of his cultural host (deep culture view). When told that globalization is rendering cultural difference obsolete because technology is the same all over the world (visible culture), we can more clearly see that sharing similar technology doesn’t guarantee that deep culture expectations or value orientations are similar. We can understand that when a second generation immigrant talks about questioning his culture that this is a reference to identity and not necessarily to the ability to get along with others in another country.

There is also an insidious danger to the idea that culture is something that rests within the individual and acts as a causal explanation for particular behaviors. If naively reinforced, this idea can imply that people from another culture behave the way they do simply because they have been socialized to do so. To examine this issue more clearly we can imagine a case study.

An American who recently arrived in Japan is with Japanese colleagues who are in the process of deciding where to go to eat together after work. The American notices that younger colleagues hesitate before giving an opinion and are deferential to
the opinions of others in deciding where to go. The American feels cultural difference, and reflects on the fact that his or her American colleagues would more likely speak up freely and debate the pros and cons of a different destination. How is this American to make sense of this pattern of cultural difference?

Someone who sees behavior as a result of internal cultural programming might see Japanese hesitation to give an opinion as a simple cause and effect result of growing up in a collectivist culture where giving opinions is discouraged. Based on this “programming,” Japanese now find themselves very good at cooperating with each other but handicapped when it comes to speaking up for themselves. The idea that Japanese cannot or do not give opinions is, of course, false. Japanese give opinions in a way which is consistent with Japanese communicative expectations. Japanese are not “handicapped” in any way. The fact that some Japanese may have trouble giving opinions in the way that an American may want or expect is not a question of relative ability, but rather of different codes and expectations. Taken to the extreme, the simple idea that Japanese do not speak up because they’ve been educated not to (cause and effect reasoning) represents a belief in a form of brainwashing relative to some ethnocentric standard.

Conceptualizing culture difference using the idea of deep culture frameworks, however, can lead to a very different learning outcome. If the American is looking for underlying cultural logic within Japanese social interaction, rather than a cause of particular behavior, he or she is more likely to start to understand Japanese communication patterns. Applying the deep cultural logic of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, for example, might lead the American to see that communitarianist values imply that individuals have important responsibilities to other members of their group, circle, or community. Giving an opinion about where to eat involves an expectation that one’s point of view takes into account the needs of the whole group. Given this relatively heavy burden of responsibility, it is natural that members take care when giving personal opinions. In the more individualist logic of Americans, on the other hand, an individual who doesn’t actively participate in the decision-making process by giving input has not contributed to the well-being of the group. Understanding these contrasting cultural logics can help intercultural learners avoid the trap of overly simple cause-and-effect thinking about cultural difference.

Conclusion

This article does not intend to imply that any one way of viewing culture or cultural difference is inherently better or truer than any other. Culture as a form of identity is an important part of debates about multiculturalism and globalization. Our cultural “programming” most certainly does influence our behavior. And finally, cultural groups most certainly do have differing deep cultural frameworks. Problems occur, however, when we mix the terms of debate or do not examine carefully the assumptions behind the terminology that we use.

Globalization is making the distinctions discussed here more important than ever. The creation of multicultural communities, more complex cultural identities,

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and the increase of intercultural contact have not led to global peace and mutual understanding. The deep culture differences of competing cultural logics, value systems, and hidden assumptions are an important element in intercultural conflict, violence, and intolerance. Yet for the most part, the field of intercultural relations has not even developed a common understanding about the terms of the debate about cultural difference. This paper has suggested the term *deep culture* as a way to describe the hidden, yet systematic cultural differences that play a role in how we interpret the world around us. The fundamental insights that this term is based on are not new, but they seem not to have permeated the discourse between interculturalists. If specialists in intercultural relations cannot find common frameworks to discuss these issues we cannot fully help find solutions to the pressing challenges of our often conflicted world.

References


Hofstede, G. (1983). Dimensions of national culture in fifty countries and three regions. In J. B. Dere-


culture. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
How does culture affect social support? When we are under stress, our cultural background may impact the type of social support we seek out and benefit from most. Research has found that East Asians and Asian Americans are less likely than European Americans to talk about an event that they are stressed by (although this difference was smaller for Asian Americans who were born in the United States). In other words, what this study shows is that cultural background can influence the type of social support that we benefit from when facing a stressful event. What can cultural psychology tell us about psychology research? Most social psychologists have conducted their studies on participants from Western countries. This is another branch of cultural identity that is often most acutely felt when people leave their homeland and go abroad, being a foreigner in a strange land. The environment cannot help but have a strong influence on culture and cultural identity, as the environment and the culture overlap, intermingle, and co-construct one another. Culture influences the environment, and the environment influences the culture. For example, the influence can be as broad as how people in urban areas of America often have more liberal political perspectives and use those viewpoints as a construct of their cultural identity. The essay aims at providing a thorough understanding of the connections which will better equip learners with cross-cultural knowledge for future studies or work. Index Terms—Language, identity, cultural difference, interpretation.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is important to gain some deeper understanding of culture because it relates to the key terms which are being examined in this essay: cultural identity and cultural college course about cultural differences between China and western countries. I could understand that in American.