Contending Cultures Among Development Actors

I n participatory research and development, culture, organizational and personal behaviors, power and politics, all coalesce.

Lewis *et al* (2003) establish a cogent argument which suggests *that serious analysis of the culture of aid organizations, and of the relationships with other actors, matters, and that it is a neglected area of analysis.* Their discussion raises important new questions about the development enterprise *from an internal perspective* that heretofore has been neglected or ignored. Contrasting the article by Lewis *et al.* with a book by Harrison and Huntington (2000) reinforces that conviction. Throughout the Harrison and Huntington book--whose authors provide an excellent overview of the history of the study of culture as something that certainly **does** 'matter' in development--we kept saying to ourselves that 'All this is fine, but it is focussed (as is much of the ancillary literature on 'culture' in development) on looking **outward, at others undergoing development**, without consideration of the development agency actors themselves. It mostly addresses questions and issues concerning the question: Why some political and national systems succeed and others fail.

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> *"Anthropology holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety."*
>
> **Clyde Kluckhohn, 1944**

What is missing in the bulk of the literature, we said to ourselves, is turning the lens around look *inward* at what Lewis *et al* (2003), Eyben (2003b) and others call the 'black box' at the heart of the donor agencies, government bureaucracies, the development firms, the non-government organizations (NGOs), and the development contractors and consultants.

What is missing is examining the world views (cultures) of the agencies, organizations and personalities that are mandated with 'doing' international research and development aid planning and implementation. In short, we need now to look at our own institutions, those doing 'development', with assisting *other* cultures, or nations, to succeed, progress and develop. We who work in development need to examine more critically our institutions and organizations, and our own behaviors, reflexively and introspectively.

There is a growing literature concerning what goes on 'inside' those cultures, the 'black boxes' of development, their organizational behaviors, their ways of knowing and doing development, their various development programs and projects (Earl, Carden and Smutylo, 2001; Grimble and Wellard, 1997; Richards, Davies and Yaron, 2003; Biggs and Matsaert 2003; Watkins and Mohr, 2001; Hammond and Royal, 1998; Biggs and Smith, 2003). The most useful of this latter literature is that which is based on, and has learnt from the earlier types of inquiry. The fact that this sensible and common sense approach does not necessarily occur in practice, is another reason for our suggesting that we have to look more closely and critically inside the black boxes of development agencies.

To some extent the top has now been taken off the Pandora's box of aid agency and development research institution cultures ('cultures' plural: there is no single mode), and it is unlikely to be ever put back on again. We are, indeed, beginning to look inward, at the cultures of our own organizations (speaking as individuals who have worked a lifetime for various development aid agencies, contract firms, research centers and NGOs).

In the past and still continuing in the present, for example, it was common to pursue research and development from an aid agency and institution-centric points of view, performing and perfecting practices ostensibly 'for them', the 'beneficiaries' of aid, in terms of new problem-solving technologies such as the 'Green Revolution' and pursuing and promoting such contemporary aid concepts as 'empowerment', 'transparency', 'poverty reduction', 'participation', 'social inclusion' and the like. That approach puts value upon coming up with 'new and better' methods of development from our point of view looking *outward*, of 'getting it right' with new and better constructs for *others* to adapt, without fully appreciating the origins, implementation and expressions of those approaches as part of *our* cultural baggage. That structural model, in short, stresses ways of doing things *to* and *for* the under-developed, with comparatively less examination of the ways in which we (the developed 'experts') can work *with* 'the beneficiaries' to *facilitate* already established and evolving innovation systems of their own. We need now to look inward to examine the impacts of our own internally established world views, cultures and personal behaviors as the outside agents of aid.

Hereafter, by the mere recognition of the internal issues arising, we find ourselves on the cusp of a new and changing paradigm, one that is being led by serious and in-depth anthropological thinking. For many development practitioners, academics and researchers the transition is, or will be (as they get on with it), difficult. This is because we are often trained in cultures of codification, problem-solving and scientific methodology that do not allow much space (if any) for anthropological concepts and qualitative measures or analysis. On other occasions we have colluded by suggesting 'ideal' and 'visionary' ways forward, with little consideration of cultural and methodological issues, whether about ourselves or about those with (or for) whom we work.

There are strong pressures for some of the new insights and their implications for development practice to be co-opted and appropriated by members of the old paradigm (*such as stuffing 'participation' rhetoric into the traditional pipelines of aid*). However, we feel this is unlikely to happen this time round, partly as it is members of the anthropology profession who are now taking us into these new areas, both in practice (working within the donor agencies and organizations of development) and in the process of developing new theories and practical applications. These are not 'new professionals' working in special projects; rather, these are long-term professionals working within their discipline, bringing about change from within both the discipline and the development organizations in which they work. Ultimately, these internal revelations will (we hope) serve to help not only to improve our practice, but also help reduce poverty and social exclusion in its many forms in the places in which we work.

Framework for Analysis

Culture as a cognitive construct is defined as ***knowledge*** that people create, learn, own, share and use to interpret experience and generate behavior (adapted from Spradley and McCurdy, 1980). Knowledge, or what one 'knows' by belonging to a particular culture or sub-culture (could be a development project, a research center, etc.), embodies sets of *values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and underlying assumptions* prevalent among people identified as belonging to a particular social entity. Culture creates the accepted 'rules' by which we each interpret what we experience and guide our individual and group responses and behaviors.

The key components of organizational behavior (derived from Lewis *et al.*, 2003, after Hawkins, 1997) are the *artefacts* (e.g., dress code), personal *behavior* (how conflict is resolved and mistakes are treated), *mindset* and *emotional ground* (values and assumptions that inform and constrain behavior, perception and emotions), and *motivational roots* (underlying sense of purpose that link--or disparage--the values of the organization and the individuals involved). These components are all grounded in cultural cognition and personal action.

The pipeline model of development suggests a 'top-down', linear, problem-solving process in which knowledge is produced by 'experts' such as an agency superior, a scientist or other 'knowledgeable person' etc., on the upper end of the 'pipeline', for 'beneficiaries' such as local development agents, policymakers, advisors, farmers, and researchers lower down the line at the receiving end. It is culture acted out in linear fashion, under which there *is no recognition of knowledge being produced within the context of social interaction between various actors*. Such a conception of knowledge with its subsequent organizational structure perpetuates a culture that tends to view users as passive beneficiaries with little or no agency ascribed to them, and who are expected to unquestioningly follow the rules and perform as they are expected by those in control. At this end of the process, there is often a stage called evaluation, to see how well users/beneficiaries have 'adopted' the new knowledge.
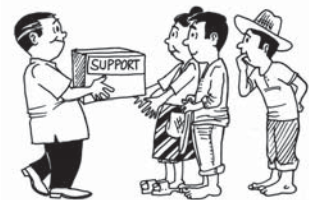
Scientist Culture in Development Research: The Hard and the Soft of It

Two of the major policy objectives of an international group of scientific research centers are to ensure responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders and to remain pro-poor. Specific goals include focusing on poverty reduction, keeping research focused on major problems of global significance, and to ensure that research is demand-driven. Recent studies of success in living up to these goals describe how the culture

of an organization defines and produces engagement between researchers and farmers, as a process. It also tells a great deal about the engagement between traditional technological researchers and social scientists promoting a more participatory research agenda. A closer examination of these relationships provides an important window of understanding on how such a relationship comes to be produced and maintained, or not, within a research center. *The values, beliefs, attitudes and practices of the organization are an important element of the engagement process between researchers (organizational members, both technologists and social scientists) and their clients (poor farmers and other poor rural people in the developing world).*

Within the last decade, the value of participatory research has become recognized as an important methodology to ensure that research is adaptive to the needs of the rural poor. Where there is support for the adoption of participatory social science approaches from donors, there tends to be good support and acceptance for such 'soft' methodologies by bio-physical scientists. Nonetheless, we must ask how the 'pro-poor' policy rhetoric and acceptance of 'soft' participatory approaches by bio-physical scientists plays out in an actual process of engagement with different staff of an organization. And, how has the participatory discourse become appropriated into a scientific and technological paradigm within an organization. This process is achieved as much by bio-physical scientists using participatory approaches for a functional end (efficiency in producing adoptable technologies) as it is by the compliance and "service role" of social scientists operating in the system.

In the past, an important strategy to bridge the gap between the functional and empowering categories was through 'experiential learning', a process in which social scientists working 'side by side' with bio-physical scientists is believed to lead to a process of mutual learning, thereby enhancing the nature and quality of engagement between the researchers and their constituents. Looking at it historically, it is interesting to see how social scientists have proceeded to define a strategy focused on a systems approach (and hence necessarily involving a process that includes working with multiple stakeholder constituents, participatory methodologies and multi-disciplinary teams). The implicit objective of this approach is to demonstrate the viability and effectiveness of social science and the participatory approach to bio-physical colleagues not schooled in it.

Research centers have developed an impressive range of research projects ostensibly scaled up from single commodities or crop specializations to the management of natural resources, and from purely technocratic approaches to approaches which included participatory modes of engagement. Despite the apparent achievements in project design, however, there are limitations when they continue to focus on single crops or commodities rather than whole ecosystems, and as research results are produced without much input from the farmers or reference to other multidisciplinary colleagues. It appears therefore that researchers may adopt the terminology and goals of the changes in their research designs, but continue to act in the ways most familiar to them, in the cultural styles of traditional research. Their style often is to co-opt the language, but not the practice.
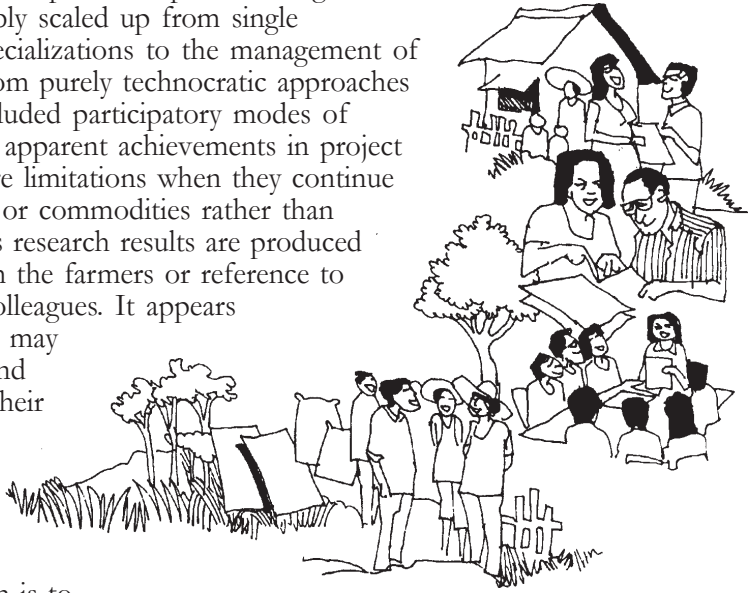
It has been found that addressing structural change alone has little chance of success unless accompanied by a shift in scientific cultures, particularly if resistance is embedded in the values, beliefs and attitudes of organizational members. Combined with these deeply-held views, the quality of personal relationships between bio-physical and social scientists (mistrust, power relations, access to donor funds) all play an important role in how views of participatory research and social science in general, are generated and maintained. Subsequently, these influence and determine how participatory approaches are employed *in practice* by technology generating scientists.

In an organizational paradigm that is dominated by practitioners of a 'linear and rational' science, the process of knowledge production can aptly be described by the metaphor of a 'pipeline'. Within such a system, the status and subsequent practice of social science is fraught with 'misgivings', affronts (both to one's personal sense of self-esteem and discipline) and a general 'dumbing down' to suit a functional and instrumental function to spread technologies that will 'alleviate poverty'. The relative isolation from end-users or farmers is rooted in the center's conventional wisdom, one that holds that scientists work most effectively when they are protected from 'political' pressures and are free to get on with the job of developing valuable technologies. Underlying this view is the assumption that 'new technology" is the key leading factor in the process of desired *social change'* (Anderson, Levy and Morrison, 1991). Finally, note the paradox here: that social analysis of the generation and diffusion of technology shows that it rarely follows the pipeline model.

An Appropriation of Cultural Language

The old days of seeing the problems and analyzing the cultures of development as being 'out there' somewhere are over. In the words on one aid agency leader: 'It is no longer about **them** as much as it is (now) about **us.**' That is, the onus is now 'in here', in the black box of aid agencies, research organizations and academic research institutions, for example, whose goals are to practice international research and development to alleviate poverty, encourage empowerment, support social inclusion, and the like. Whether language, methods, theories, etc., are co-opted, modified, fussed, or scaled-up, etc., depends on the culture of the project, the organization, or the program. And while co-option will surely continue and genuine change will likely continue to take place, the old "them-and-us" dichotomy is no longer meaningful as a way to speak and behave as we engage in the hard work of development. Pandora's Box is open, and it will be hard to close. Rosalind Eyben's studies (2003, 2004) and others that are coming into the literature reflect that at least some international development agencies and government bureaucracies are now showing a propensity to shift the focus of Clyde Kluckhohn's (1985) 'great mirror' to reflect inward, on agency actors and their behaviors, to seek the source of some of the internal organizational and cultural incompatibilities that undercut our best efforts at development.

Conclusions: Personal Choice

The move towards more transparency, more reflexive attitudes in the workplace, etc., brings us to focus on the importance of the choices we all make about what worldview and type of personal behaviors we wish to develop, and what types of workplace culture we choose to support by our actions.

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