Cultural Competence in a Transnational Workplace

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I.   General Considerations

Neither universalism – the belief that ethical rules and social practices are or should be the same in every human society – nor particularism – the belief that each separate society has its own entirely distinct ethical rules and social practices – accurately reflects social reality. Certain broad ethical ideals – including such precepts as people should be treated fairly, intentional killing of fellow humans should be avoided, the very young, the infirm, and the very old deserve care – are shared across cultures even if the particular definitions of "fairly," "avoid," and "deserve care" differ from place to place and era to era. Yet, other ethical questions – for instance, the acceptability of homosexual relations, the roles of women in society, or the acceptability of suicide – are answered in strikingly different ways around the world.

For much of human history, the differences in ethical rules and social practices were unimportant because particular individuals had little contact with societies other than their own. Such contacts have been increasing rather steadily since 1450, and in the contemporary era of globalization involve large numbers of people directly through travel or indirectly through greater availability of art, performances, videos, literature, and commentary on the Internet. Members of different societies interact more frequently; more ideas and images spread across political and cultural boundaries.

Scientists and engineers pursue their endeavors within the context of a particular society. For most, that society is the one in which they grew up; they are familiar with their society's standards of conduct from life-long socialization into them through family, schools, and interaction with others in their immediate communities. For some, however, the society in which they pursue their career is different from the one in which they grew up, and their knowledge of society's standards is likely to be weaker in consequence. Though scientists and engineers are participants in a transnational professional community, their immediate interactions with colleagues, clients, funding agencies, and others is shaped by the society in which their place of employment is located. The transnational character of science and engineering means that scientists or engineers can pursue their knowledge-building and knowledge-using activities anywhere. Common standards of evidence and reasoning, a common fund of accepted knowledge, and common standards for assessing the merits or shortcomings of fellow professionals' work prevail. At the same time, however, the specificity of their workplaces mean that other aspects of their work lives are affected by the

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ethics and practices of the society in which it is located. East Asians coming to study or work in Europe or North America soon learn that authors are expected to state their conclusion in the beginning of a scientific paper or engineering memo and write in their own words rather than quote authorities extensively and assume the reader will follow an argument to the conclusion stated at the end. North Americans going to study or work in East Asia soon learn that they need to show greater deference to senior scientists and engineers than they would usually be expected to show at home.[1]

The notion that science and engineering rests on common transnational standards of reasoning, evidence, and judgment of work has been challenged in some intellectual circles. Both postmodern theorists and proponents of the "strong programme" in social studies of science maintain that what are called the "common standards" of science reflect a partial, Eurocentric approach to knowledge resting on dubious presumptions about knowledge that emerged during the Enlightenment. In their view the Enlightenment's belief that human reason could understand the universe clearly and accurately rests on two mistaken notions: 1.) that it is possible to understand phenomena by breaking them down into their particular parts and analyzing interactions among those parts, and 2.) that scientific or engineering activity can be "objective" in its selection of problems to study, definitions of reality, and assessments of hypotheses – guided solely by reason and well-insulated from the social power wielded by political, economic, and/or religious elites.[2] Postmodernists and "strong programme" proponents believe that phenomena can only be understood holistically and that social power pervades all aspects of science and engineering from the problems selected for study to the definitions of concepts, to the acquisition and interpretation of evidence, to the assessment of hypotheses. Yet, scientists themselves have been debating how far phenomena can be understood by breaking them into parts; ecology, biology and general systems theory all offer holistic conceptions of physical phenomena.[3] Scientists and engineers have acknowledged the workings and possible influence social power without giving up on the possibility of developing reliable knowledge and applying it to understanding and working with physical objects in ways that are not completely subordinated to the interests or desires of those who currently wield social power.[4]

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[1]Such experiences are discussed in Sharon Traweek. 1988. *Beamtimes and Lifetimes: The World of High Energy Physicists.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[2] The "strong programme" originated in David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1966). Barry Barnes, David Bloor, and John Henry, *Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Analysis* (London: Athlone, 1996) summarize the state of the strong programme through case studies. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Geoff Bennington and Brian Massoumi, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 is a key statement of the postmodernist position.

[3] E.g., J. E. Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of our Living Earth* (NY Bantam Books, 1990); Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (1998); G. Klir, ed., *Trends in General Systems Theory,* pp. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972).

[4] These include Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) Philip Kitcher. 2001. *Science, Truth, and Democracy.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

II. Cultural Differences

Considerable thought has been given to understanding the ways in which cultures differ from one another. Academic work on cultural differences ranges from anthropologists' detailed ethnographic studies of particular peoples or groups to anthropologists' and sociologists' studies of how cultural differences affect interactions among individuals and groups, to efforts to identify broad differences among cultures. These efforts have identified a number of dimensions on which cultures differ and elicit varying patterns of behavior among the individuals and groups living within a particular culture.[5] These are often expressed as contrasting or varying orientations on broad dimensions, such as:

1.) high context/low context (participants in interaction and exchange assume there is a thick common framework of meanings and understandings so specify few details – participants assume there is need to specify details in contracts or other arrangements).

2.) polychronic/monochronic (people are willing to do more than one thing at once – people prefer focusing on one task or activity at a time).

3.) future/present/past orientation (optimism about future and ability to shape it – uncertainty about future and more focus on immediate term – strong consciousness of the past and desire to maintain tradition).

4.) unlimited time/limited time (regarding time as plentiful and always available – regarding time as limited and needing to be used well or lost).

5.) control/harmony/constraint (view physical and social context as something that can be controlled with right action – as something to fit one's plans into – as a constraint that excludes some activities).

6.) individualist/communal (self-definition in terms of one's own personal goals – self-definition in terms of the goals of a group which one belongs).

7.) vertical/horizontal or hierarchical/egalitarian (sharp stratification and high social distance between persons of different ranks – mild stratification and low social distance between persons of different ranks).

8.) doing/being (focus on observable accomplishments – focus on affiliations, character, qualities).

9.) assertive/nonassertive (obvious efforts to advance one's own or one's groups interests are acceptable – such efforts are undesirable).

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[5] Such as Clyde Kluckhohn and Fred L. Strodtbeck, Variation in Value Orientations. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1961; Talcott Parsons, "The Pattern Variables" in On Institutions and Social Evolution: Selected Writings. Leon H. Mayhem, ed., pp. 106-114. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; Stephen Rhinesmith, *Cultural Organizational Analysis: The Interrelationship of Value Orientations and Managerial Behavior.* Cambridge, MA: McBer and Company 1971; Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev ed. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press 1991; Charles Hampden-Turner and Alfons Trompenaars, *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism*. New York; Doubleday, 1993; Geert Hofstede and G. J. Hofstede. 2005. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

10.) <u>centralized/decentralized</u> (concentrating leadership and decision-making in one person or a small group leadership – allowing local communities or subgroups within organizations leeway to make many of their own decisions).

11.) <u>holistic/analytical or systemic/linear</u> (think in terms of interrelated wholes – break things into parts linked in chains of cause and effect).

Detailed descriptions of cultures help people understand others' way of life and appreciate the variety of ways in which humans satisfy material, intellectual, and spiritual needs. Efforts to identify and summarize the effects of broad contrasts among cultures help people orient themselves intellectually to dealing with persons from other cultures. Knowing that one's own culture is high context, communal, and assumes unlimited time and that the one where one will be working is also communal but low context and assumes limited time promotes awareness of the points on which one's interactions with new collaborators are likely to be difficult. However, neither the detailed descriptions nor the efforts to outline broad contrasts provides enough guidance about coping with others of different mindsets and behavior in daily social and work life. Guidance on those matters is more prominent in applied psychological and social psychological studies, analyses of organizations, and those parts of the business and professional self-advancement literatures focused on cross-cultural negotiation or workplace relations.

III. The Tangle of Generalization

Generalizations about members of particular nationalities or of even more encompassing groups like Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews or Moslems come in two forms. Cultural generalizations are built up from broad experience with many individuals and represent the results of inductive reasoning. Stereotypes are also built up inductively, but tend to be drawn from behavior that the outsider or outsiders regard as irritating or morally abhorrent and to get exaggerated in the process. Both cultural generalizations and stereotypes can be misleading because particular individuals do not always conform to them; stereotypes are more likely to reinforce rather than reduce barriers to understanding since they focus on perceived differences defined as particularly unpleasant.

The path of reasoning from cultural generalization to individual behavior is long because culture, broadly defined as a distinct set of values, norms, practices, and institutions defining life for members of the culture can exist at five levels:

a.) the civilization, or level of broad affinities linking sets of countries,

b.) the country, since each distinct political unit develops its own particular political culture, economic organization, and social mores within its civilization,

c.) the organizational, pertaining to the firm, university, or other organization within which a person works, pursues community endeavors, or engages in leisure activities,

d.) the group or team, whether at work, in the community, or in social relations, and

e.) the interpersonal, as individuals of the same or different larger cultures interact with one another and develop expectations about their relationship with each other.

This multilayering indicates that individual mindsets and behavior are shaped by several levels of group membership interacting with the individual's own personal characteristics and inclinations.

Cultural generalizations and stereotypes are particularly misleading if the people using them fail to remember that no culture prescribes uniform responses to all occasions and interactions. Every culture has rules about how different sorts of persons (older/ younger, male/female, higher ranking/lower ranking, close friend/new acquaintance, professional/client, etc.) should interact. It also has different rules for conduct on different occasions (at work, at home, at a festival, in a friend's home, at a funeral, at a house of worship, etc.).

IV. Effective interaction in the Workplace

Knowledge of the civilizational and country culture of a place where one will work, or from which collaborators come, is only the start of successful cross-cultural interaction in a particular workplace. To that knowledge must be added attentiveness to the nature of the situations, the character of the particular individuals, and a willingness to observe others and adapt. The habits of mind needed for effective cross-cultural work can be organized under three headings: those forming general preparation for cross-cultural collaboration, those promoting effective interactions inside and outside the workplace, and those most relevant to workplace success.

General Preparation

1.) Willingness to continue learning about other cultures and communities, including knowledge of a country's or area's history, political, economic, and social conditions, and current debates. Individuals learn about and master appropriate behavior within their own culture over time; acquiring the knowledge needed for understanding another culture also takes time.

2.) Ability to manage the stress of operating in an unfamiliar setting, whether this is a workplace altered by new colleagues coming from elsewhere or an assignment to work abroad. Stress will be greater on assignment abroad since interaction outside work will be in the unfamiliar culture and inspire feelings of being out of place and having to cope with others' stereotypes about one's own country or culture.

3.) Cultivation of language skills. Individuals vary considerably in their ability to learn a second or third language, but those on assignment in another country will find ability to read signs and make simple requests in the local language helpful. At the other end of the scale, some studies suggest that people expect outsiders who are fluent in their language to conform more closely to local cultural norms than outsiders who are not fluent.

Workplace and Social Interactions

1.) Ability to use knowledge of the country or area to guide observation and interaction.

2.) Sensitivity to one's own and others' verbal and nonverbal communication, all the choices of words, tones of voice, gestures, and less conscious "body language" that provides clues about another person's mood and intentions.

3.) Ongoing observation and reflection on others interacting with members of their own culture or persons of other cultures to refine one's own understanding of what sorts of conduct elicit favorable and unfavorable reactions or when situations are becoming dangerous.

4.) Willingness to change one's own behavior when acting as one would at home or among members of one's own culture would cause offense and to follow local customs even when they seem awkward.

5.) Attentiveness to following the social etiquette appropriate to the situation (when in another country) or to helping visitors follow the proper etiquette (when hosting foreigners).[6]

6.) Willingness to understand how persons of other cultures assess who is or is not trustworthy and behaving in ways that establish credibility with them when needed.[7]

<u>Workplace Success</u>

1.) Developing ability to negotiate successfully with persons of other cultures, whether to conclude particular bargains or to develop collaborative relations by understanding which methods are or are not acceptable in other participants' cultures.[8]

2.) Enhancing ability to influence colleagues from other cultures by understanding how to get them to participate in discussions and accept suggestions.[9]

3.) Developing ability to manage, defuse, or resolve workplace conflicts between self and persons of other cultures by understanding what words and actions increase or dampen conflict or mistrust.[10]

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[6]W. Arthur, Jr. and W. Bennett, Jr. 1995. "The international assignee: The relative importance of factors perceived to contribute to success," *Personnel Psychology* 48: 99-114.

[7]J. Sullivan, R.B. Peterson, N. Kameda and J. Shumada 1981. "The relationship between conflict resolution approaches and trust, -- a cross-cultural study," The Academy of Management Journal 24: 803-815; P.M. Doney, J.P. Cannon, and M.R. Mullen 1998. "Understanding the influence of national culture on the development of trust," *The Academy of Management Review*. 23: 601-620.

[8]J.M. Brett, and S. Okumura. 1998. "Inter- and intra-cultural negotiation: U.S. and Japanese negotiators" *Academy of Management Journal* 41: 495-510; V.C. Sheer, and L. Chan 2003. "Successful Sino-Western business negotiations: Participants' accounts of national and professional cultures." *Journal of Business Communication* 40: 50-85; M.J. Gelfand, M. Erez, and Z. Aycan. 2007. "Cross-cultural organizational behavior," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58: 479-514.

[9]M.J. Gelfand, M. Erez, and Z. Aycan. 2007. "Cross-cultural organizational behavior," *Annual Review of Psychology* 58: 479-514; J.S. Black and L.W. Porter 1991. "Managerial behavior and job performance: A successful manager in Los Angeles may not succeed in Hong Kong" *Journal of International Business Studies* 22: 99-113;

[10]T.R. Tyler, E.A. Lind, and Y.J. Huo 2000. "Cultural values and authority relations: The psychology of conflict resolution across cultures," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 6: 1138-1163; J. Sullivan, R.B. Peterson, N. Kameda and J. Shumada 1981. "The

4.)   Enhancing ability to establishing authority vis-à-vis colleagues or clients of different cultural backgrounds by understanding how to establish leadership or control over actions among persons of other cultures.[11]

Study Questions

1.)   What are the similarities of and differences between cultural generalizations and stereotypes?

2.)   What are the dimensions on which cultures differ? Can you name countries where the culture favors a particular orientation on each dimension?

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relationship between conflict resolution approaches and trust, -- a cross-cultural study," *The Academy of Management Journal* 24: 803-815; K. Ohbuchi, K. and Y. Takahashi 1994. "Cultural styles of conflict management in Japanese and Americans: Passivity, covertness, and effectiveness of strategies." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 24: 1345-1366; M.W. Morris, K.Y. Williams, K. Leung, R. Larrick, M.T. Mendoza, D. Bhatnagar, J. Li, M. Kondo, J. Luo, and J. Hu 1998. "Conflict management style: Accounting for cross-national differences," *Journal of International Business Studies* 29: 729-747.

[11]T.R. Tyler, E.A. Lind, and Y.J. Huo 2000. "Cultural values and authority relations: The psychology of conflict resolution across cultures," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 6: 1138-1163.