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Misconceptions of Culture in Cross Cultural Business and Management Studies

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Abstract:

In this paper, I critique the clichéd representations of culture in the general context of cross cultural business and management studies. My primary objective is to demonstrate how a lack of conceptualisation of culture has resulted in the proliferation of cultural stereotypes. I identify some possible causes for the creation and acceleration of these clichés. Then, using the example of ‘global culture’, I seek to question some of the underpinning assumptions about the very essence of culture. I intend to create awareness about the potential risks of oversimplification of certain terms and concepts and call for more in depth treatment of culture in the broad area of business and management context.

Keywords:

Misconceptions, Culture, Stereotypes, Business and Management Studies

Introduction

‘Culture’ is one, and perhaps the most important, of the elephant-in-the-dark concepts that has dominated cross cultural business and management literature, in general, and textbooks, in particular. Since the word ‘culture’ is a noun, like an orphan in need of a guardian, it is easily embraced by many adjectives to form a variety of interesting combinations such as ‘global’ culture, ‘national’ culture, ‘Western’ culture, ‘individualistic’ culture, ‘Islamic’ culture, and so and so forth. Interestingly, whilst these adjectives are meant to provide more clarifications, paradoxically they become ‘blind guides of the blind’. “The more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque” (Bauman, 1998, p.1). These terms are problematic. They are rooted in narrow modern discourses that advocate dichotomous categories (e.g., West vs. East, global vs. local, national vs. foreign, etc.). Furthermore, they are tightly knitted with essentialism and twinned with universalism. That is, they attach a series of definite and fixed characteristics to certain societies and generalise these features to categorise them. These ‘excessive’ and ‘unbalanced’ claims (McSweeney, 2002) draw rigid boundaries between some and distinct groupings between some other cultures as though they are either *totally separate* or *totally identical* jigsaw pieces.

An immediate outcome of such a simplistic and essentialistic approach toward culture is the proliferation of stereotypes, which do not differ much from the cultural clichés reflected in the mass media. However, the more serious, and somewhat endemic, problem lies in the fact that these taken-for-granted assumptions are broadly used as fundamentally and absolutely ‘true’ bases of knowledge for shaping educational materials and intellectual debates in academia and managerial guidance for practice. Generally, such terms are not clearly defined and conceptualised, and their epistemological and ontological underpinnings remain largely ignored. Consequently, they are usually exaggerated, misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused. Among all possible causes, the roots of this problem could be related to the following reasons:

Reason one

Quite often, when used in business and management contexts, these terms are not supposed to explain ‘culture’ per se, but to serve certain goals such as understanding ‘global’ segmentation, standardisation or adaptation of marketing mix, marketing research, foreign market entry modes, business relationships, organisational behaviour, etc. Therefore, little attention is given to exploring the term ‘culture’ and any of its guardians more in depth. Instead, usually, discussions of culture are confined to hackneyed topics such as Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) cultural dimensions, global culture, Westernisation, Americanisation, problems of advertising certain goods in Islamic countries, etc. Yet, since these topics provide instant recipes (i.e., easy and quick answers) to difficult questions, they continue to be satisfactorily serving the intellectual, educational, and managerial goals.

Reason two

A considerable number of authors of such textbooks are not experts on culture. Therefore, in their writings, they usually refer to their own personal, and sometimes very limited, experiences with and memories of other cultures. In other words, they confront the elephant in the dark and fail to see the broader picture. For instance, for someone who has visited Dubai in the UAE, the Middle East means Dubai as Dubai represents the Middle East culture. The same is true about the Far East and China, Africa and Tanzania, Eastern Europe and Poland, and the like. These terms imply a kind of cultural uniformity in a geographical context. As Huang (2007, p.24) emphasises, it is “a misconception to judge cultural value systems only by geographical location. It is not always that countries near to each other are also closer to each other in terms of cultural values.”

Another example is the misunderstanding of ‘Islamic’ culture. Typically, the term ‘Islamic countries’ is used to refer to a series of clichéd cultural values and attitudes (e.g., family integration, anti-Western attitudes, restrictions on the consumption of alcohol, the ruling of Sharia or theocratic law, etc.). In this regard, the key misconception lies in the fact that Islam is looked upon as a uniform culture rather than a philosophy of life and a civilisation. There are 57 Islamic nation-states in the world, and each of these societies comprises of a diversity of cultures. Like any other religion, Islam has also been historically indigenised in the cultural settings of each society. Therefore, it would be a big mistake to ignore all the historical cultural values and beliefs that these societies had traditionally lived by before embracing Islam.

Reason three

A sizeable amount of such materials are written by Western scholars most of whom do not usually go beyond stereotypical representations of other cultures. Most of these authors can barely tear the cocoon of a hegemonic perspective that has traditionally haunted the minds of a large number of Western academics, especially within the social sciences. A majority of Western writings, as Said (1978) also notes, depict, for example, a strong image of the West in contrast with the weak non-West. These studies largely do not acknowledge the historical trajectories that underpin cultures. More specifically, in the domain of international business and trade, they ignore the fact that all human societies around the world have historically contributed to the ways of doing business. For instance, the Silk Road has a history of more than 2000 years and ancient civilisations (e.g., China, India, Persia, Egypt, and Rome) had a great impact on the development of international trade. The significant contributions of all those societies with great cultures are not generally acknowledged. Therefore, corporate social responsibility, sustainable consumption, business ethics and the like cannot be new phenomena; neither can they be the sole ethical characteristics of 'post-materialistic' Western societies (see, Inglehart, 2000; Carrasco, 2007), which are spreading to the rest of the world. As Asongu (2007) nicely reminds, these concepts and their practices can be traced back to ancient civilisations. Religious teachings are also full of examples in which all of these issues have been highly emphasised (see, for example, Bertch et al., 1994; Beekun, 1997; Numkanisorn, 2002; Wagschal, 1990).

Reason four

Academia has become a commercial institution that needs to be competitively more productive in order to keep pace with the rapid growth of and competition in related businesses in industry (e.g., universities, publishing companies, student recruitment agents, consultancy sector, etc.). As a result, the quality of production (i.e., of books, articles, and databases) seems to be sacrificed for its quantity and speed. For instance, every year a large number of books are published on international marketing (including new editions). These books treat culture as a static entity, as though it never changes. Typically, culture is trivially explained with *Biblical* references to Hofstede's cultural dimensions and other stereotypical examples. Since further research needs more resources, these *Commandments* seem to have sufficiently explanatory power on the subject of culture. Perhaps, that is why despite their many flaws (e.g., methodological and epistemological) (see, for example, McSweeney 2002 and Fang, 2003 for critiquing the Hofstedian approach), these concepts are overwhelmingly present in the academic literature. They even go beyond the business and management studies. For example, in a simplistic approach, Cooper-Chen (2005, p.10) uses Hofstede's cultural dimensions to analyse the consumption of media in individualistic and collectivistic cultures: "People in highly individualistic nations read more books and have more home PCs, whereas people in collectivist nations enjoyed television more, because individualists 'rely more on media and less on, for example, their social networks for information' (Hofstede, 2001, p.242)." On the same page, she writes, "Hofstede (2001, p. 171) does not focus on mass media but he makes some references about the dimensions that shed light on cross-cultural understanding of media; for example, cultures with low Uncertainty Avoidance Index (that can tolerate ambiguity) have 'more open-minded mentality, in searching for information and in accessibility to innovation' (in other words, such cultures will likely adopt the Internet and read books and newspapers)."

Cooper-Chen's conclusions are problematic for a variety of reasons. First, she uses *nation* and *culture* interchangeably. As McSweeney (2002) rightly accentuates, it is a fallacy to use these two terms synonymously. Second, she totally fails to understand the economic aspect of the scenario; not everybody in every country can afford a PC. She overlooks many other factors that influence the use of the Internet in a country. For instance, the technological infrastructure (e.g., developments in telecommunications and availability of Broadband) and economic, political, and industrial drivers (e.g., the availability of online transactions offered by industries and governments' restrictions on the use of the Internet) all affect the use of the Internet (see, Johari, 2002). Last but not least, like Hofstede, she is entrapped in incorrect generalisations. For example, according to Hofstede's cultural analysis, Iran falls within the collectivist category; therefore, normally it should have a low rate of Internet use. Cooper-Chen might be surprised to learn that currently there are 23 million Internet users in the country (IRNA, 2008). Given the 70-million population of the country, this is a significant figure (32.8%), one that could challenge the above claims.

Reason five

Business and management studies are largely interested in measurements and matrices (i.e., generated by quantitative research methods and used for more research, teaching, and managerial implications). Therefore, like many other concepts, culture is also rendered quantified to fit such matrices. Typically, when minimally boxed, these concepts become clichés. Yet, the advocates of such terms may perceive any criticism solely from a methodological perspective, believing that their critics belong to the qualitative camp and are generally biased towards quantitative methods. Therefore, there is consistent resistance to reconsidering such claims (see, for example, Hofstede, 2002, in defence of his methodology).

Having explained the above reasons, here I should emphatically make it clear that in this paper I do not intend to create the impression that all those who write about culture in the business and management context are wrong; neither do I want to make big claims to knowledge as an omnipotent expert on culture. It is true that a majority of the aforementioned terms (with culture in the centre) have been clichéd; yet, as Berger (1997, p.23) points out, "most clichés have a degree of factual validity." Therefore, I do not intend to fundamentally reject these concepts; rather my primary objective is to defamiliarise the term 'culture'. I seek to question some of the underpinning assumptions about the very essence of culture. In other words, I want to create awareness about the potential risks of oversimplification of certain terms and concepts.

In the paragraphs that will follow, due to space constraints, I will discuss only 'global culture' as an epitome of these terms. In so doing, first I will briefly outline 'global culture' and its supporting theories. Then, using the relevant literature, I will critique the idea (of global culture) and demonstrate that the approach of advocates of 'global culture' is simplistic. I will conclude the paper by calling for more in depth treatment of culture in the broad area of business and management context.

Global culture

In its very common use, global culture refers to the fact that globalisation erases local cultures and spreads a homogeneous (predominantly Western or American) culture all over the world. In the mainstream business and management studies, globalisation (which places the West in the centre and the rest of the world in the periphery) is widely perceived as a homogenising process that brings about a standardised and commodified Western culture. For instance, McDonald's fosters a mode of fast food habit in people's food culture and Levi's spreads uniformity of appearance in individuals' clothing style. This kind of interpretation is rooted in a purely economic outlook which views globalisation in terms of omnipresence of global brands, globalisation of consumer culture, global access to digital media, international diffusion of technology, and other forms of profound economic integration across national borders (Boggs, 2001). Although in this spectrum cultural differences among 'nations' are acknowledged, there is exaggeration about the formation of a universal consumer culture that eats the same food, wears the same clothes, listens to the same music, watches the same movies, etc. Therefore, it is believed that this lifestyle uniformity will result in the disappearance of the diverse local cultures.

In a broader sense, advocates of this approach mainly comprise of cultural imperialism theorists, Neo-Marxists, and those who view globalisation mainly from an economic perspective. In this stream, scholars refer to two concepts of media (e.g., Hamelink, 2004; Mohammadi, 1995) and commoditisation (e.g., Mattelart, 1983; Knox, 1995; Bauman, 1998; 2000). Their proposition is that through large multinational and transnational corporations, the media and economy of Western (developed) countries have dominated other (less developed and developing) societies. As a result, a hegemonic culture is taking over the globe and homogenising other cultures into *one single 'global culture'* based on Western (and particularly American) values and lifestyle.

Cultural imperialism and media

From this perspective, Western media are believed to disseminate their own cultural values and images to all parts of the world. For instance, Hamelink (2004) indicates that local cultural markets are dominated by transnational corporations (e.g., Hollywood) that leave limited space for local producers of cultural products. This domination, which is driven by the economic power of capitalism, creates a one-way flow of cultural images from rich and powerful (Western) countries to less resource-rich (non-Western) societies. Schiller (1976; 1985) also stresses that communication technologies have provided Western media with a strong means to not only carry the cultural images of their sources to non-Western countries, but also the cultural perspectives that produced those images. The most obvious example of these Western values, according to Schiller, is consumerism that is fostered by the commercialisation of TV programmes. In another instance, McPhail (1987) argues that the unequal and hierarchical cultural interaction between the media of dominant (Western developed) countries and marginal (less-developed) countries leads to the absorption of the peripheral cultures in the dominant cultures.

Capitalism and consumerism

Advocates of this approach theorise Western capitalism as a homogenising force that pushes other societies toward a Western model of consumerism. This form of consumerism, as Scholte (2000, p.113) indicates, is "centred on the satisfaction of

transient desires, especially cravings for novelty, entertainment, fantasy, fashion and pleasure". For example, Bauman (1998; 2000) believes that the global project of capitalism changes producers to consumers and controls all aspects of human lives. Bauman views capitalism as a strong source that defines and regulates social patterns of living for individuals. According to Bauman (2000, p.76), capitalism standardises life in all corners of the world in the sense that it creates 'comparison with others' as the only means of measuring one's performance in a materialistic society. In his view, global capitalism creates and increases an unquenchable thirst in consumers for more 'desires and volatile wishes' that are normative not according to the social values of their societies but based on the rules set by producers.

Does the 'global culture' really exist?

The answer is a straightforward 'no'. There cannot be a single global culture. As a large number of scholars (e.g., Appadurai, 1990; Giddens, 2005; Tomlinson, 1991, 2003; Nijman, 1999; Featherstone, 2004; Smith, 1990) also note, globalisation does not destroy local cultures, neither does it homogenise them. The world culture is created through "the increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as through the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory" (Hannerz, 1990, p.237). Also as Tomlinson (2003) asserts, globalisation is not a one-way flow of cultural images and values from Western countries to non-Western contexts.

What theorists of 'global culture' fail to appreciate is that there is not one single centre (namely West or America) and one single periphery (the rest of the world); there are multiple centres and peripheries. For instance, for the Republic of Armenia there is a fear of being absorbed by Russia; for Cambodians there is a fear of Indonesianisation; and Indian domination is a threat to the people of Sri Lanka. This fear of domination (in economic, cultural and political domains), therefore, is not limited to the case of America or West and the rest of the world (Appadurai, 1990).

Moreover, these scholars are obsessed with the economic aspect of globalisation. As Appadurai (1990, p.296) stresses, "the complexity of current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics which we have barely begun to theorise." Therefore, globalisation can no longer be understood in terms of the existing simplistic centre-periphery paradigms, economic trade balance models, immigration theories, Marxist theories of consumer-producer, or the like. Appadurai's (1990) analysis of the different dimensions of globalisation (ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ethnoscapes, finanscapes) can best explain that globalisation is not confined in economy and that even these dimensions are all 'perspectival':

I use terms with the common suffix scape to indicate first of all that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighbourhoods and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes.... (p.296)

Appadurai's 'scapes' are the 'building blocks' of the 'imagined worlds', an extension of Anderson's (1983) 'imagined communities'. This means that the world we live in today is *fluid* and has no regular shape because cultural flows (scapes) dynamically move all around the world. Besides, different groups and individuals around the world view these dynamics from different perspectives. Therefore, since there is not a fixed shape for the world, globalisation does not mean that a single culture can dominate the globe.

Consumer culture and global culture are misunderstood

Obviously, there is a big misunderstanding about consumption and consumer culture. The advocates of 'global culture' have a narrow understanding of consumer culture and its varying dynamics. As many frequently cited consumer researchers (Ger and Belk, 1996; Wilk, 1995; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Sandikci and Ger, 2002) argue that globalisation of consumption culture does not create a homogenous culture. On the contrary, the global expansion of consumption culture facilitates the display of new identities via the commodification of a diversity of identities. That is, the commodification of consumption – as a symbolic mediator for instance – provides the ground for creating meanings, self-images, self-identities and values (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Featherstone, 2004). Since these identities, images, and values are very diverse in different societies around the world, consumption (of even similar products) cannot lead to the emergence of a single global culture which is similar everywhere.

Adding 'consumptionscapes' to Appadurai's (1990) framework of globalisation of cultural flow, Ger and Belk (1996) argue that consumptionscapes carry different images which are perceived and/or interpreted differently in diverse contexts. Friedman (1990) and Sandikci and Ger (2002) also refer to the indigenisation of cultural meanings in different consumer societies and argue that individuals in diverse localities respond differently to the global products. Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) refer to the case of centre-periphery and argue that the similarities of consumer societies depend on the richness of the market resources. Wherever diversity of market resources is rich (centre), cultural diversity is more; and wherever market resources are poor (periphery), cultural diversity is less.

Featherstone (2004, p.2) also rejects the formation of a homogenous global culture and believes that the so-called globalising consumer culture "aims not at standardisation (mass consumption), but at an expanding flexible range of goods, experiences and images – a regulated diversity (mass customisation), and that such a culture actually results in a "proliferation of signs and images which leads to a cultural overload." Likewise, Nijman (1999, p.150) writes, "Cultural globalisation does not necessarily imply homogenisation and the emergence of a single global village." Globalisation "does not erase local cultures, it undermines their original form" (p.161). He uses the case of Amsterdam, as an example of the identity of a place and cultural consumption, to show that a cosmopolitan city like Amsterdam has not lost its local culture as a city; rather it has been enriched as a result of the exchange of diverse cultures in the global sphere. Similarly, Smith (1990, p.171) concurs with this view asking:

Can we speak of culture in singular? If by culture is meant a collective mode of life, or a repertoire of beliefs, styles, values and symbols, then we can only speak

of cultures, never just culture; for a collective mode of life, or a repertoire of beliefs, etc., presupposes different modes and repertoires in a universe of modes and repertoires. Hence, the idea of a global culture is a practical impossibility.

Correspondingly, Featherstone (1990, p.1) asks:

Is there a global culture? If by a global culture we mean something akin to the culture of the nation-state writ large, then the answer is patently a negative one. ...The varieties of responses to the globalisation process clearly suggest that there is little prospect of a unified global culture, rather there are global cultures in the plural...the world is a singular place which entails the proliferation of new cultural forms for encounters.

Criticising McLuhan's (1961) notion of the *global village*, Giddens (2005, p.73) also stresses that globalisation "does not produce a seamless world that is similar everywhere; it does not produce a global village...in many ways it produces a more fractured world." He rejects the imperialistic determinism and argues that the age of globalisation is 'a period of disappearance of empires' (p.72):

In a way, people recognise America as [a] kind of expression of globalisation, as much as a directing influence on globalisation. It is a massively culturally diverse society with all sorts of different influences...the term 'Americanisation or 'American imperialism' or 'cultural imperialism' are not very useful, because Americans themselves are an expression of globalisation, a kind of contested expression.

In a different account, Davies (2000, p.2) rejects the concept of Americanisation and states that a 'genuine world culture' is appearing "in the sense of cultural products, languages and images which are consumed, created and understood on a global basis." He further asserts, "one aspect of this [global culture] is the appearance of English as a true global *lingua franca* but it affects every area of culture – film, clothes, architecture, design, food, and icons." He believes that "this is not a matter of American culture taking over the rest of the planet. The global culture is currently forming in the United States because it is English speaking and the most dynamic and open society in the world, as well as the richest, but its elements come from all over the world."

Simply put, Giddens (2005) and Davies (2000) argue that American society is a good example of a globalised context which comprises of diverse cultures. Because this multicultural society does not have an old history of civilisation, it does not resist cultural globalisation and is more receptive of other cultures. In this regard, Castells (2000), for instance, refers to the example of European identity and interprets the integration of Europe as a reaction toward globalisation. Countries with long-established histories and civilisations show more resistance to cultural globalisation than other countries. These countries challenge the influences of globalisation in order to sustain their own cultural sovereignty. In other words, although they take part in global activities (such as economic and political alliances and protocols) in order to be regarded as active players in global games, they adopt certain 'strategies' to 'differentiate' themselves from other cultures (Appadurai, 1990).

Then, what goes wrong?

Another main problem with the advocates of 'global culture' is that they have narrowed globalisation mainly to studying the expansion of American and Western 'culture' to other parts of the world (Tomlinson, 2003; Legrain, 2003; Osterhammel and Petersson, 2005). Such studies have shown serious concerns toward a uniform Western/American culture absorbing other cultures because they have used globalisation and Americanisation/Westernisation synonymously and culture and media interchangeable. As Legrain (2003, p.B7) asserts, "If critics of globalisation were less obsessed with 'Coca-colonisation', they might notice a rich feast of cultural mixing that belies fears about Americanised uniformity." Legrain (p.B7) tactfully observes that the theory of Americanisation is the result of misunderstanding the nature of globalisation:

It is a myth that globalisation involves the imposition of Americanised uniformity, rather than an explosion of cultural exchange. For a start, many archetypal 'American' products are not as all American as they seem. Levi Strauss, a German immigrant, invented jeans by combining denim cloth (or 'serge de Nîmes', because it was traditionally woven the French town) with Genes, a style of trousers worn by Genoese sailors. So, Levi's jeans are in fact an American twist on a European hybrid...

To support his thesis, Legrain uses a series of examples and argues that many famous products that symbolise America are in fact from other cultures. There are several things from other cultures that are used worldwide but are ignored in the studies of globalisation and culture. For instance, some of the world's most favourite sports such as martial arts and football that originated from Asia and Britain respectively. There is also the example of food: Indian restaurants outnumber McDonald's six to one; pizzas are more popular than burgers; Chinese takeaways and Japanese sushi, Russian Vodka (Smirnoff) are also spreading fast. In the realm of cultural production, India produces more films than Hollywood; Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Paulo Coelho are also not American authors whose works have conquered all corners of the world. Even Hollywood's best directors and superstars are not all American. Japanese Sony, German Bertelsmann, and French Vivendi have are also the leaders in the world's media industry.

Similarly, Osterhammel and Petersson (2005, pp. 134-6) reject the integration of global culture into a single hegemonic *American* model of consumer society. They justify their argument by identifying three reasons: First, multinational corporations (even the American ones) take new tastes and products to other parts of the world and these tastes and products are often localised according to the local conditions of their target markets. Therefore, even when we talk about the West, we do not talk about Americanisation. We refer to numerous national and regional "*varieties of capitalism and selective adaptation and innovative hybridisation of American models in European and Japanese industries.*" Second, the West and the United States, themselves, have changed during the process of cultural globalisation. That is, these societies have not remained untouched. For instance, pop music originated from America and found its way through the entire globe and a variety of cultures. Then, the same altered pop music enters America and is embraced by American youth. Third, the traditional conflicts between the 'new' and the 'old' has always existed in

all societies. Therefore, it is not easy to talk about Americanisation as all societies resist against 'the other' coming from 'another culture' to protect what one 'owns'.

Conclusion

In this paper I sought to create awareness about some common clichés about culture in the general context of business and management studies. I also tried to identify some possible causes for the creation and acceleration of these clichés. Then, I used the example of 'global culture' to explain how such hackneyed terms are the result of misconceptions about the very nature of culture and other terms (e.g., consumption, media, nation, etc.). As demonstrated earlier, when the term culture is not precisely conceptualised and appropriately contextualised, it can create more misunderstandings and cultural stereotypes; and this is dangerous for academia. This is dangerous because it discredits the intellectual competence of academia. Even if business schools or schools of management are supposed to follow a 'professional' model rather than a 'scientific' one (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005), this should not be used as an excuse to undermine the intellectual premises of academia upon which the general welfare of the society rests.

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