Building Bridges: Contextualizing Worldviews Through Cultural Syndromes and the Importance of Expressing Metaphorical Perspective

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Abstract

This critical review of literature draws upon current practices in teaching culture. An examination of existing theories and models exposes limitations and a lack of consensus on how to teach varying worldviews across disciplines. This analysis establishes that understanding the context of human behaviors offers a level of comprehension that results in a deeper, more significant cross-cultural communication experience. Specifically, this review probes how understanding *cultural syndromes* offers an appropriate contextual framework and how the use of metaphor creates insight into another culture's meaning. The authors of this review conclude that further investigation is needed to rethink and align existing theory and methodologies into new models for teaching and understanding culture.

Key words: Teaching culture; Cross-cultural communication; Metaphorical perspective

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing emphasis among academic and business institutions alike on internationalizing curriculum to produce globalized competencies, especially regarding understanding other cultures. The purpose of this critical review of literature is to investigate current practices in the delivery of teaching culture in higher education and other settings and to examine existing theory and models. This analysis of the literature establishes that understanding the context of these behaviors offers a level of comprehension that may result in a deeper, more significant cross-cultural communication experience. This was done by probing how *cultural syndromes* (Triandis, 1993) build context and how the use of metaphor builds bridges to another culture's meaning. This allows the learner to interpret the meaning of a given culture as it is, rather than how they think it is or should be.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This critical analysis of literature reveals that there are two primary approaches to teaching culture: Assimilating factual cultural knowledge (customs, traditions, art, literature) and/or establishing reference points between one's own and target cultures through interpretive frameworks (Thanasoulas, 2001). The former model is limited to describing culture, and the other takes a dimensional route that leverages profiles proffered by Hofstede, House (GLOBE study) and others. Both approaches are limited to building cultural profiles that are descriptive in nature, but do not facilitate learner understanding and the transformation that accrues from deeper understanding. Nor does either approach take into consideration that understanding culture is founded on the interplay among the elements of cognition (mind), affect (heart), behavior (body), and identity (self) (Hanvey, 1979; Hoopes, 1979; Wayne, 1996, as cited in Moran, 2001). This suggests that there is no attempt to enable a deeper understanding of self or target cultures nor do these models provide mechanisms to navigate between cultures (Thanasoulas, 2001).

Current Frameworks for Teaching Culture

One common setting for teaching cultures is in foreign

language programs (Fageeh, 2001). The most common foreign language framework that informs how to teach language and culture is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework. This framework includes approaches such as the Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP) approach (Klapper, 2003). Other important emerging frameworks from the CLT follow Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) approaches (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003; Willis, 1996). Consequently, literature indicates there is no single language-acquisition methodology (Klapper, 2003; Wayne, 1996).

Similarly, culture is commonly taught as part of preparing students for a study-abroad experience. The literature indicates a trend that learning objectives most commonly expected in study-abroad programs are intercultural competence, second-language acquisition, and learning in the disciplines (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004). However, these learning outcomes are situated within an integrated approach that draws from language-learning strategies to inform how cultural competencies are obtained.

Likewise, business organizations conduct cross-cultural training for personnel traveling abroad with similar desired outcomes of acculturation and functionality. That is, business models emphasize pragmatics to enhance competence in conducting international business, cross-cultural communication, and workplace diversity (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006) as it relates to the assignment at hand. The emphasis here is task-oriented, limiting the level and depth of insight one needs to establish more meaningful connections for continued future interactions.

Therefore, cultural scholars stress the importance of meaning for effective communication. To address this, literature points to the need for individuals to construct a theme or image that enables them to interpret and/or translate a particular culture (Gannon & Pillai, 2010). In essence, understanding culture is a meaning-making process (Spillman, 2002, as cited in O'Reilly, 2005). Consequently, this process would include a model or strategy that incorporates two significant elements: a foundational understanding of how culture forms and a process that enables students to construct a metaphor for their own and for the target culture.

Understanding How *Cultural Syndromes* Are Constructed

What is meant by culture? How is it constructed and how is it diffused and shared among culture members such that it manifests as the behavioral norm or syndrome? In the literature, the researchers began with Oyserman and Sorensen (2009) who postulated that culture is "patterned beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets that go together in a loosely defined network" (p.27) to illustrate the point that *cultural syndromes* serve as a unifying link among the shared values assumed to create a sense of community,

leading to the formation of a culture. For their part, they have operationalized Triandis' (1993) original hypothesis where he used *syndrome* to define culture as a system of shared subjective elements, which, when organized around a theme, can be identified as a syndrome.

To better illustrate these viewpoints, the authors of this review found it is helpful to distil the common variables mentioned in the literature as follows: (a) culture is a construct of distal factors, a response to both physical and man-made environments; (b) culture is a subjective entity comprising elements such as attitudes, beliefs, mindsets, norms, and so forth; (c) these subjective elements are shared by, and therefore common to, all members of the culture or society; and (d) these subjective elements are manifest in the patterns of behavior (syndrome) demonstrated by members of that culture or group in their everyday social interactions. Understanding these concepts is a critical component that serves as a foundation for understanding how to articulate and analyze cultural behaviors.

However, neither Triandis (1993) nor Oyserman and Sorensen (2009) account for how people create these patterns, nor do they examine how they are transmitted to the members of that culture or group. In other words, it is not enough to say that a cultural syndrome can be identified or that it exists and, therefore, serves as a link between the distal determinants that created those patterns that impacts a group's current behavior. The real question is, how do these patterns form, and then, how do they become "networks of knowledge" as Hong (2009) purports?

It is pertinent at this point, therefore, to examine some of the other theories and research on culture. For purposes of the investigation, the literature will limit the scope of the following sections to subjective elements of culture.

Defining Culture

Culture has been defined in myriad ways. Traditional discourse treats it as a global construct, using nation as a proxy for culture, influenced largely by Hofstede's seminal work, *Culture's Consequences* (Gannon & Pillai, 2010). However, Hofstede himself seems to have deviated from his original thinking; in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Hofstede *et al.* (2005) define culture as "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from others" (p.6).

In contrast to the static, monolithic model that traditional discourse about culture has often adopted, modern researchers posit that culture is a dynamic, organic entity that is constantly evolving and changing irrespective of geographic boundaries. Schwartz (2009), for instance, envisages it as a "dormant, hypothetical variable, existing outside the individual that influences the distribution of individual beliefs, actions, goals, and styles of thinking through the press and expectations to which people are exposed" (p.128). Hong (2009), as previously noted, views it as networks of knowledge, consisting of

learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting that exist as a body of knowledge and perceptions about a given people's cultural reality (p.4). Similarly, Schwartz, and Tsui, Nifadkar, and Ou (2009) argue that culture is a "latent, hypothetical construct" (Schwartz, 2009) that should be viewed as "interrelated and interacting configurations or patterns that characterize groups of people," (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2009, p.176). Finally, Kashima (2009) proposes a Neo-diffusionist approach that views culture as a body of information transmitted from person to person through their social interactions.

All of the theorists researched so far have most or some of the following in common: (a) they view culture as a body of knowledge or information comprising ideas, behaviors, skills, values, linguistic patterns, mindsets, and attitudes; (b) this information is transmitted to all members of the group, which implies that it is learned and stored in their collective conscious; and (c) this information is a collective or shared entity accessed by all members of the group in their everyday social interactions. Based on these common themes, it is possible to operationalize culture as "socially transmitted information" (Carruthers, Laurence, & Stitch, 2006) that coalesces to the point where it generates a collective pattern of behavior, or syndrome, among the group's constituents. This provides the framework for the next stage of the inquiry: How is this information created, stored, and shared?

Creating, Storing, and Transmitting Culture

Where do cultural ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and values come from? Why do some of these ideas hold fast across generations while others fade away? Why do some ethnic groups demonstrate some similar behaviors and not others? According to the literature, the body of evidence accumulated by social scientists, cultural anthropologists, cultural psychologists, and even biologists, suggests that the answers might reside within a multitude of disciplines including history, geography, psychology, linguistics, and biology. To understand how culture is created, literature suggests examining worldviews from these multiple perspectives.

Ecology. There is historical precedence from numerous regions of the globe that establishes that human beings have always adapted to their environment. Whether that took the form of subjugating the environment, battling it, or living in harmony with it often determined the adaptive strategies developed by the people of that region. Nisbett (2003) offers the following examples: (a) the fertile plains of China built cooperation and harmony among its people because rice farming requires them to work in concert; and (b) on the other hand, Greece, being largely mountainous, led to traditions of hunting, trading, and fishing conducted in isolation for the most part. Thus, these adaptive strategies became the foundations of the cultures of those regions, coalescing over time to become the normative behavior for that group.

Culture as an Evolutionary Process. According to Buller (2005), evolutionary psychologists such as Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, David Pinker, and David Buss are staunch advocates of the theory that if the Darwinian process of natural selection can create universal anatomical adaptations, then it is logical to assume that it has created universal psychological adaptations as well that over time have become universal human nature. Boyd and Richerson (2005) also postulated that culture could be studied as a Darwinian evolutionary process because it is a part of human biology. Organic evolution over the centuries has shaped people's brains and minds to the point where the processes by which humans become acculturated or enculturated are deeply entrenched in biology and psyche. Thus, according to these researchers, all humans have the capacity to acquire, store, process, and share information.

Evoked and Epidemiological Culture. This is an extension of the evolutionary approach to culture first proposed by Tooby and Cosmides in 1992 (Buller, 2005). Building from the theory of universal psychological adaptations, they argued that differences in local environments would "evoke" different responses from the universal human culture, leading to the creation of a new body of cultural content designated as "evoked culture". On the other hand, they use the term "epidemiological culture" to explain the phenomenon of socially transmitted information; that is, an idea originates in the mind of an individual and then travels from person to person, much as a disease travels from one to another, until it is adopted by all and becomes a part of the group culture.

Culture Is Learned Behavior. It is evident at this point that culture is essentially learned group behavior, accruing from a common, substantive body of knowledge shared by a definable population and different from the behaviors demonstrated by other population groups. It is also evident that the ability to learn and synthesize information is part of the human cognitive process and embedded in our psyche, and that social interactions serve as one of the transmission channels by which people share and learn.

Transmission Models. Evolutionary theories about culture have already established that humans have garnered both biological and psychological capacities to learn from others and align their behavior to the cultural group to which they belong. This information exchange can happen through diverse transmission channels including: (a) social learning, which encompasses mimicry, instruction, and other forms of social transmission (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011; Tomasello, 2004); (b) conformist transmission, a term coined by Henrich and Boyd (1998) to explain human tendency to adopt the most common behavior(s) of the group, especially in environments that fluctuated both temporally and spatially; and (c) prestige-biased transmission, conceptualized by Henrich and Gil-White (2001) as a form of social learning that suggests

natural selection processes evolved so that the most skilled or knowledgeable individuals in the group would be imitated by the rest, who, by virtue of their deference, accorded them prestige markers.

Language and Communication. Communication plays a critical role in the transference of information, a fact that has been recognized by numerous psychologists. Further, these communication processes, or interpersonal interactions, happen on a regular basis, which could result in the creation of a cohesive and common corpus of ideas and beliefs (Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). In short, culture could be the unintended consequence of habitual discussions among group members.

Neo-Diffusionism. The notion of diffusionism, or the process by which cultural components spread across people, societies, and geographic regions, first emerged in Europe in the early 19th and 20th centuries (Goldstein, King, & Wright, 2009). In fact, Blaut (1993) contends that diffusionism emerged as a response to colonialism, the primary and permanent European interest during that time, and eventually became a belief system of that era. However, this early version did not account for the mechanisms of how cultural information was transmitted across a population, nor did it provide any empirical evidence to substantiate its claims.

Contemporary researchers, cognizant of this flaw, not only made sure to accentuate said mechanisms, but also studied possible repercussions for the diffusion process itself. This contemporary approach was termed Neo-diffusionism to differentiate it from the original school of thought (Kashima, 2009). Although there are many models and theories that have studied culture using this approach, Kashima's (2009) research proposes that the transmission of cultural information is a deliberate act or socially coordinated activity. This activity occurs for a discrete amount of time, as defined by the collaborative goals of the participants (the activity ends when the goals have been met), is situated within a specific context, and leverages communication tools.

According to Kashima (2009), joint activities of this nature allow for the transmission of cultural components that are mutually understood as part of the context and add to existing understandings and knowledge, thereby expanding them. Further, who is transmitting to whom is as important as what type of information is being exchanged. Kashima continues to assert that this is especially significant because it implies that information about cultural identity can accrue from deliberate, contextual, and collaborative social interactions. As social interactions of this nature cumulate, they could eventually lead to a cohesive pattern of information that is representative of the group's identity, mindset, and norms.

EXPRESSING METAPHORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The above sections articulate the subjective elements of culture, more specifically, how ideas, beliefs, and traditions are diffused and established within a population group to become its normed cultural representation of meaning -- a cultural syndrome. The role metaphor plays in understanding *cultural syndromes* is the crux of this section. According to McCourt (1997), Gareth Morgan stated that metaphors are fundamental components of scientific thinking and that the "process of scientific enquiry is, in fact, a process of finding and elaborating metaphors" (p.512). Another perspective is offered by Nicholson and Anderson (2005), who postulate that metaphors are critical components of the process by which individuals make sense of phenomena. In essence, metaphors allow the individual to build bridges to alternate realities. They can "generate insight into how things really are" (McCourt, 1997, p.515).

There is precedent that establishes the validity of metaphor as a valuable tool in teaching culture. For example, to Gannon (2010), metaphors serve as a symbol that expresses the shared values of an ethnic or national culture of a given population. These symbols represent the emotional and/or cognitive connections they identify with, allowing students of culture to make appropriate connections that lead to a clearer awareness of a given cultural reality.

Kövecses (2002) advances the notion of metaphorical frames; that is, cases where a cultural frame is structured or referenced by another cultural frame or model. His position indicates that metaphor serves as a two-way mirror, allowing insight into another culture while framing it within one's own. Newell (2009) echoes this perspective of metaphor. Newell contends that metaphor serves as a perspective that removes the researcher from interpreting cultural behaviors within an analytical framework to a more organic one that gleans meaning from the cultural experience itself. This is achieved by interpreting and comprehending the metaphor from the vantage point of personal experiences or "experiential coherence" (Klagge, 1997, p.76).

Therefore, the authors of this literature analysis assert that metaphors are a valuable tool in cultural understanding as they allow people to see values and characteristics with which a nation or ethnic culture closely identifies. Based on the current literature (Gannon & Pillai, 2010; Kövecses, 2002; Newell, 2009), developing models that culminate in a metaphorical perspective (mental model) could lead to deeper understandings of other cultural epistemologies.

Constructing a Metaphorical Perspective

This section focuses on processes for metaphor generation. For example, Gannon's process for constructing metaphors is a leading model in the field of understanding culture. In his process, he emphasizes the identification of a national/cultural phenomenon, activity, or institution that is cognitively or emotionally significant to most or all of the population.

Gannon bases the structure of a metaphor on the theoretical framework of cross-cultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists. The components of structuring a metaphor include an analysis of multiple dimensions that exist within cultures: (a) six age-old dimensions centered on the work of Kluckholn and Strodtbeck (1961); (b) communication patterns centered on the work of Hall (1990); (c) country profiles based on Hofstede (1991); and (d) the Globe Study (House *et al.*, 2004). These dimensions provide a scaffold for synthesizing cultural traits into reference points that construct meaning, which bridges cultures. Therefore, the characteristics of the metaphor offer a profile of a given culture and its primary attributes (Gannon & Pillai, 2010).

Further, Lubart and Getz (1997) describe the creation of a metaphor as a process that builds on a two-phase construct: (a) identify a source domain that serves as a foundation to generate a metaphor; and (b) make connections to create mappings between the source (one's own culture) and target domain (the other culture). For instance, Kövecses (2002) illustrates this process by describing that one initially connects two diverse conceptual paradigms to gain new insight that begins the process of building a mental model (metaphor). That is, metaphor is an organic outcome of an emotional reaction to an unfamiliar experience (Lubart & Getz, 1997).

However, while literature indicates that metaphor development is an intrinsic human trait, deep insight requires the deliberate creation of conceptual mappings between the source and the target culture (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). Literature points to language as one of the primary themes for developing conceptual mappings. For instance, the very act of speaking in a common language plays a vital role in how it influences people's conceptual constructs and what they use to represent information and events (Latane, 2006). Wang and Xu (2009) also use a linguistic interpretation of culture where a set of shared basic presuppositions within a given cultural context create a unique cultural language, such as idioms and colloquialisms, which forms its conceptual core. This core can then be individually analyzed to gain new understanding.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this review of literature, the authors set out to discover the scope of how culture is taught and understood, the subjective elements of cultural knowledge in how it shapes ideas, beliefs, and traditions, and how it then becomes the stable cultural representation of a given population. This review began by exploring current frameworks and models for teaching and understanding culture. The authors also examined how syndromes evolve, are constructed, and are diffused among a population to develop a common set of shared values and behaviors that form a cultural foundation.

Several themes emerged in this review. First, it became evident that there is no consensus on teaching models for understanding culture and that it is limited to language acquisition, study abroad, business training for travel, and workplace diversity. Therefore, there is a lack of focus on how one can negotiate between and among cultures. These limitations restrict the level of depth in gaining essential competencies and cultural awareness, leading to a dysfunctional experience for all involved.

Consequently, the next theme exposed the importance of understanding *cultural syndromes* and how they emerge. This understanding underpins the aforementioned competencies and enables the learner to map the connections between self and target cultures resulting in meaning making for the learner. Developing a sense of meaning requires a learner to bridge the abstract with the concrete by using analytical tools that combine language with imagery; the literature points to the use of metaphor as this instrument.

While this review speaks to the themes discussed above as necessary factors in constructing cultural competencies, the assembly of these elements fails to align them in a manner that fosters understanding while developing the necessary skills to have a successful learning experience. This suggests that rethinking and realigning existing theory and methodologies into new models for teaching and understanding culture might add value to the existing body of knowledge in the field of cultural studies.

Specifically, the authors of this review recommend a new approach that would involve facilitating an understanding among students of how initial mores are shared and adopted in forming universal themes within a community. Once this process is understood by learners, it is then possible to progress toward a conscious investigation of existing cultural dimensions within the current literature, thereby offering new insights for understanding of self and others. According to Hanvey (1979), Hoopes (1979), Wayne (1996), and Moran (2001) this connection from self to others can be attained by leveraging a model that aligns cognition, affect, behavior, and identity with the understanding of cultural perspectives and context. As a result of this investigation of the literature, the new model needed to accomplish these objectives will be the focus of a future study for the authors.

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