Negotiating Beyond an Essentialised Culture Model: The Use and Abuse of Cultural Distance Models in International Management Studies

Michael Jeive, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Olten, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

The analysis of international negotiations at bachelor and master level appears dominated by a conception of national culture (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Shenkar et al 2008), and applies cultural distance models widely and inappropriately. Few business encounters are actually national in nature, being rather encounters between individuals or small groups with developed cultural practices and behaviours. There is a parallel tendency for users to abuse the models by failing to recognise the impact of relative power and agency; by ignoring culture as construct; by eliding small and large cultures (Holliday 1999, 2011); and by falling into the so-called ecological fallacy (Robinson 1950; Hofstede, Bond & Luk, 1993). Within the dominant neo-liberal ideological context (Read, 2009) presented in much of the business and management literature, the “othering” (Devlin 2011b, 2015) of those perceived as being outside this narrowly defined norm is a constant danger. In effect, a narrow minority is often represented as the mainstream and the vast majority as varyingly exoticized others. The aim of the paper is to investigate the theoretical and practical problems inherent in the national culture distance dominated approach before reflecting on how an approach which focuses on specific communication instances can open a pathway to understanding culture formation and cultural challenges in a more nuanced way.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Distance Models, International Negotiations, Management Education, Negotiation, Trust

INTRODUCTION

This paper is born from the somewhat disconcerting recognition that students I have taught in bachelor and master level course in international management programmes while working in Swiss universities of applied sciences since 1997 as well as executives and officials we advise and who take part in continuing education programmes are subjected to a national culture dimension diet within intercultural management courses which fails to prepare them to analyze culture formation and cultural interaction in specific cases. It has become increasingly clear that the most common cultural distance models (e.g. Hofstede, 1980) tend towards a reductionist, essentialist and deterministic approach which results in cultural encounters and challenges being described in overly simplistic and exoticized terms. Meanwhile, students, executives and officials when asked to analyze negotiation encounters or trust development in specific situations, tend to generate more nuanced descriptions which is less “othered” (Dervin, 2012, 2015a) more richly conceptualized and reflect on agency, process, interests and motives. The paper will reflect on the most common cultural distance models and their limitations.
before considering how a negotiation or trust development approach applied at a “small culture” (Holliday, 1999) level may help to promote greater interculturality (Dervin, 2015b). This paper will examine the culture value dimension approach most commonly associated with Hofstede, discuss why this approach is inappropriate for virtually all cases in international negotiations and then, drawing on insights from negotiation and trust theory, will propose an approach which focuses on a small cultures (Holliday, 1999) and which considers how agency, power and common or conflicting interests interact to create localized cultures in international encounters, or negotiated cultures. The aim of the paper is to investigate the theoretical and practical problems inherent in the national culture distance dominated approach before reflecting on how an approach which focuses on specific communication instances can open a pathway to understanding culture formation and cultural challenges in a more nuanced way. As much of the evidence behind the arguments has stems from consulting activities and confidential sources, it has not been possible to include quotes or use a visible discourse analysis methodology. As a result, the paper does not provide testable empirical data and is therefore an attempt by an author somewhat outside the mainstream of culture and identity studies to make a contribution which might inspire or provoke a more explicitly evidence-based response.

The analysis of international negotiations within business schools especially within general management programmes at bachelor and master level appears dominated by a conception of culture which focuses on the national level (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Shenkar et al., 2008), and applies cultural distance models widely and often inappropriately. While the models may have some relevance and application when analyzing encounters at a national level, very few business encounters are actually national in nature, being rather encounters between individuals or small groups each of whom have developed complex specific cultural practices and behaviors. Although the use of intercultural dimensions may add value and help to sensitize some practitioners to general tendencies within societies, there is a parallel tendency for users to abuse the models by failing to recognize the impact of relative power and agency; by ignoring culture as construct, by eliding small and large cultures (Holliday, 1999, 2010) and assuming national culture primacy in analysis; and by falling into the so-called ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950; Hofstede, Bond, & Luk, 1993). Within a context in which a consistently dominant neo-liberal homo-economicus ideology (Read, 2009) is presented in much of the business and management curriculum and literature, the “othering” (Dervin, 2011b, 2015b) of any individual or group perceived as being outside this narrowly defined range is a constant danger. In effect, a privileged, but narrow minority is often represented as the mainstream and the vast majority as varyingly exoticized others.

The very success of the cultural distance metaphor most popularly attributed to Geert Hofstede, but stretching back to the work of Franz Boas (1940), the Kluckhohns (1951, 1961), Edward Hall (1959, 1966) and many other similar writers has become counter-productive insofar as there is a tendency to describe culture in static functionalist terms decontextualized from the complexities of real encounters (Søderberg & Holden, 2002; Vaara, 2003). Shenkar et al (2008) amongst others (e.g. Jack & Westwood, 2006; Lauring, 2008) argue that this functionalist approach ignores questions of power relations thus minimizing the attention paid to questions of interests and hierarchical position. These factors are, and must be, central to any interpretation of commutative acts and therefore of the emergence of any negotiated culture.

**CULTURAL DISTANCE MODELS: A BRIEF DISCUSSION**

The essentialist and deterministic tendency intercultural communication and management research can trace its roots back to the direction of research within anthropology which took the work of Franz Boas as its basis. Boas (1940) proposed a neo-Kantian conception which saw culture as consisting of a number of culturally separable factors or principles each of which could be individually investigated within the category of language (Sahlins, 1976; Stocking, 1966). This research agenda or paradigm tended towards a belief that the study of language and grammar was sufficient to enable the researcher
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