Toward a Theory-Based Measurement of Culture

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In reviewing the history of the conceptualization and measurement of “culture,” one quickly realizes that there is wide-ranging and contradictory scholarly opinion about what values, norms, and beliefs should be measured to represent the concept of “culture.” We explore an alternate theory-based view of culture via social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that each individual is influenced by plethora of cultures and sub-cultures—some ethnic, some national, and some organizational. In IS research, the culture of subjects and respondents is problematic because it is typically an overly simplistic categorization. IS research nearly always assumes that an individual living in a particular place and time belongs to a single “culture,” e.g., someone living in Egypt is automatically classified as being a member of the Egyptian culture, or, more broadly, the Arab culture. This dearth of clear concepts and measures for “culture” may explain why cross-cultural research has been so exceedingly difficult to conduct. It may also explain why it has been hard to develop and refine theories. Moreover, it may give insight into why reasonable explained variance in predictive models has not been higher. Finally, it is very possible that much cross-cultural business research could be rightly accused of advancing an “ecological fallacy” by not recognizing the individual makeup of persons with respect to culture. Using SIT (or other theory bases) as grounding for cultural research programs implies the use of certain methodological approaches. Each study would have to establish the salient “cultures” in each individual’s background and include these different “cultures” as independent variables in positivist research. In qualitative research, there would need to be an equally rigorous assessment of the cultural identifiers of each individual.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization of business highlights the need to understand the management of organizations that span different nations and cultures. In modern multinational, transnational organizations, information technology (IT) must be utilized to achieve efficiencies, coordination, and communication. Clearly, though, cultural differences between countries impact the effectiveness and efficiency of this IT deployment. A study of cultural conflicts, therefore, is of paramount importance for modern organizations and for IT scholars.

Despite its universally recognized importance, the effect of cultural factors on IT outcomes has received limited attention from information systems (IS) researchers. As a result cross-cultural information systems research, in general, remains in a state of infancy. Although several important research endeavors have been recently published in the top-ranked, established IS journals, the overall number of cross-cultural articles is fairly low, considering the number of practical and theoretical critical questions that remain unanswered (Gallupe & Tan, 1999). This disparity can be partly explained by methodological and resource difficulties inherent in cross-cultural research as well as the long time horizon required to complete/conduct these types of studies. It may also be explained by the lack of unanimity about the underlying meaning and definition of the underlying construct “culture.” In this essay, therefore, we explore the meaning of “culture” and consider new ways of conceptualizing and measuring it for global information management research.

In reviewing the history of definitions of “culture,” one quickly realizes that there is wide-ranging and contradictory scholarly opinion about what constitutes “the” set or even a reasonable set of values, norms, and beliefs for “culture.” We explore an alternate theory-based view of culture via social identity theory (SIT), which suggests that each individual is...
influenced by a plethora of cultures and sub-cultures—some ethnic, some national, and some organizational. In IS research, the culture of subjects and respondents is problematic because it is typically an overly simplistic categorization. IS research nearly always assumes that an individual living in a particular place and time belongs to a single “culture,” e.g., someone living in Egypt is automatically classified as being a member of the national Egyptian culture, or, more broadly, the ethnic Arab culture.

This dearth of clear concepts and measures for “culture” may explain why cross-cultural research has been so exceedingly difficult to conduct. Rather, we suggest that an individual’s social identity represents that amalgamation of cultures across boundaries (national, organizational, professional, etc.), which fuse together to create one’s overall culture. The combination is unique to each individual. It may also give insight into why it has been hard to find reasonable explained variance in predictive models. Finally, it is very possible that much of the work could be rightly accused of advancing an “ecological fallacy” by not recognizing the individual makeup of individuals with respect to culture.

Using SIT (or other theory bases) as grounding for cultural research programs implies the use of certain methodological approaches. Each study would have to establish the salient “cultures” in each individual’s background, the composition of these “cultures,” and then include these different “cultures” as independent variables in positivist research. In qualitative research, there would need to be an equally rigorous assessment of the cultural identifiers of each individual.

This approach also has the advantage of explicitly recognizing that these different layers of culture can intertwine in complex ways. Therefore, a particular behavior may be more influenced by a given layer of culture than others, implying that the layers do not have a fixed sequential position (Evaristo, Karahanna et al., 2000). If we consider an “onion” metaphor to describe these layers where layers closest to the core of the onion are more relevant, then the picture is of a “virtual onion” with inner layers occasionally exchanging places with outer layers. The layers are permeable. The thickness of the layers signals the strength of the value held by the individual. Moreover, the interrelationship between a layer and a specific behavior may vary depending on external circumstances—creating a virtual onion where each layer may move in or away from the core.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

“Culture” has always been a thorny concept and an even thornier research construct. It has been studied for over a hundred years in disciplines such as cultural anthropology and in numerous other academic areas ranging from psychology to cross-cultural business management. The wide variety of scholars working in these areas have produced numerous definitions of culture. These definitions range from the simple to the complex, incorporate and extend previous definitions, and even contradict prior definitions. Many researchers have used more than one definition of culture depending upon the time the definition was formulated and the subject matter to which it referred. In this section, we first examine the term culture from a historical perspective by assembling some of its earliest and most general definitions. We next group these historical definitions into three classes.

“Culture” in Early Work

According to Kroeber (1949), the word “culture” came into English usage (as distinct from cultivation and refinement) from nurture, from agriculture and pearl culture, and from test tube cultures in 1871. Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871) defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (p. 1). Prior to this, the term culture was used with its modern meaning in the German word “Cultur” as early as 1843 (Kroeber, 1949). Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s early review (1952) of cultural definitions found over 160 different instantiations.

Definitions in the 1950s were instrumental in establishing distinctions and etiological perspectives. Kroeber (1952) defined culture as “the historically differentiated and variable mass of customary ways of functioning of human societies” (p. 157). Parsons and Shils (1951) intimate that culture is composed of a set of values, norms, and symbols that guide individual behavior. Herskovits (1955) later argued that there is a general agreement that culture is learned; that it allows man to adapt himself to his natural and social setting; that it is greatly variable; that it is manifested in institutions, thought patterns, and material objects” (p. 305).

Subsequently, there has been a multiplicity of definitions of culture, classifiable into three main groups. The first group represents the most common view on culture and is labeled Definitions Based on Shared Values. The second group is Definitions Based on Problem Solving while the third group details a number of General All-Encompassing Definitions. Below we discuss key definitions in each of these categories.

Definitions Based on Shared Values

A number of scholars have focused on shared values as the central feature and distinguishing characteristic of a culture. Values refer to relationships among abstract categories that are characterized by strong affective components and imply a preference for a certain type of action. According to Rokeach (1973) a value is an “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance” (p. 5).
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