How do we adopt multiple cultural identities? A multidimensional operationalization of the sources of culture

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ABSTRACT

Given the shortcomings of unidimensional accounts of culture that are based on nationality, this paper builds on and steps beyond current multidimensional conceptualizations of culture in order to provide first empirical evidence for a multidimensional operationalization of culture. It shows the multiple and simultaneous sources of cultural values (i.e., Family, Nationality, Urban/Rural Background, etc.) that individuals draw from in order to behave in accordance with their social setting. This contributes to our understanding of *how* and *when* individuals adopt multiple cultural identities. As the first attempt to operationalize the 'mosaic' framework of culture proposed by Chao and Moon (2005), this paper presents rich and detailed accounts from participants operating in various multinational organizations located in Munich, Germany and Cape Town/Johannesburg, South Africa. Findings reveal that the operationalization that was used in this study can determine which cultural facets are more influential than others in different settings. It further shows how some individuals willingly adopt distinct cultural identities in different social settings (i.e., home culture versus organizational culture), while others acquire permeable identities, bringing their home culture to work. Thus, we provide a multifaceted view of what constitutes culturally derived behaviour and how individuals' multiple cultural identities can be managed in the workplace.

1. Introduction

The gap between how culture is conceptualized and how it is operationalized in cross-cultural studies is widening, mainly due to the difficulties associated with the definition and measurement of such a complex, highly abstracted and multidimensional construct (Kitayama, 2002; Schaffer & Riordan, 2003; Taras, Rowney, & Steel, 2009). While culture is predominantly conceptualized as a multifaceted system that influences individuals' behaviour through espoused values derived from their interaction with their external environment (D'Andrade, 1981; Geertz, 1973; Hannerz, 1992; Schwartz, 1992), cultural distance/difference is still predominantly measured using 'national' variances (Earley, 2006; Shenkar, 2001), with associated prescriptive and predictive capabilities (Allik & Realo, 2009; Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2004; Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013). However, the

reality of globalization has put this latter approach into question. As Tung (2008) notes, most developed and many developing countries are culturally heterogeneous and multi-ethnic in profile, with long-established immigrant diasporas. Consequently, there is a significant discrepancy between what individuals articulate as their nation's 'cultural norms' and what they have internalized as values and behaviour (Todeva, 1999). This discrepancy between an individual's value orientation and the aggregated national-level value orientation indicates the need for a conceptualization that takes individual-level as well as national-level determinants of value orientations into account to ensure that national-level determinants of cultural behaviour are not overemphasized at the expense of other individual-level or group-level determinants (Birkinshaw, Brannen, & Tung, 2011; McSweeney, 2002; Seo & Gao, 2015; Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2012; Williamson, 2002).

The growing recognition of the interaction between these different levels has resulted in an increasing call for a *system-view* rather than an *entity-based* operationalization of culture (Kitayama, 2002). A system approach takes multiple cultural dimensions and their socializing agents into account in order to develop the notion

that individuals can not only occupy multiple cultural spaces, but also simultaneously draw from various sources of values depending on their situation (Chao & Moon, 2005; Earley, 2006; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Swidler, 1986; Taras et al., 2009). Consider the following vignette (adapted from Dietz, Gillespie, & Chao, 2010: 3):

Nadia, an Iranian businesswoman, is negotiating with a prospective alliance partner from Germany. When she enters the room her counterpart, Peter, extends his hand for her to shake as a first gesture of goodwill. Nadia hesitates but takes his hand briefly. While Peter is impressed by her apparent cultural openness, her Iranian colleagues are shocked, seeing as it is neither customary nor appropriate for Iranian women to touch unfamiliar men. But Nadia has studied in the United States, and worked with European firms throughout her career. She has learned to switch among styles of working when necessary.

Individuals in such encounters reveal how a dichotomy between, for example, 'German culture' and 'Iranian culture' can be oversimplified, inaccurate and even potentially discordant, given that it becomes difficult to determine *which* cultural values are being used in this context: national, educational, professional or organizational?

Building on these arguments, the paper's contribution to the cross-cultural management literature is twofold. First, in contrast to the prevailing studies in this area, it adopts a multidimensional conceptualization *and* operationalization of culture by taking individual, group and national-level determinants of cultural values into account. Second, in doing so, it provides the first empirical illustration of how multiple cultural dimensions result in situation-induced behaviour, and how interactions between multiple sources of values can enable individuals to adopt and manage 'flexible' identities. We mobilize the 'Mosaic' framework proposed by Chao and Moon (2005), as a dynamic, comprehensive and methodologically flexible framework to reveal how individuals perceive their own cultural identity and how they draw from multiple cultural facets in a given social setting. The findings advance theoretical debates regarding the manifestation of a multifaceted operationalization of culture by empirically demonstrating how individuals draw on different, simultaneous cultural facets (tiles) in order to behave in accordance with their social setting. In addition, we show that the tiles within the 'Mosaic' framework that are activated vary according to the context in which individuals function. Finally, our study suggests that organizations could better manage cultural diversity within a workforce by seeking to activate those tiles that cohere closely with key organizational values.

2. Conceptualizing culture

2.1. Classic and contemporary concepts of culture

There have been various approaches in defining and conceptualizing culture in the literature on the basis of epistemological viewpoints (i.e. culture as an etic or emic construct, as a dependent or independent variable), causing fragmented, polarized and contended understandings of culture (Martin, 2002; Sackmann, 1991; Smircich, 1983). Culture was originally defined by Tylor (1871) as "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*" (p. 1). Subsequent definitions referred to culture as an instrument utilized by individuals in order to give meaning to the world around them and was determined by their history, and transmitted from one generation to the next (Malinowski, 1944; Parsons, 1951).

Later authors such as White (1949), Geertz (1973), and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) proposed that culture should be viewed as a science — consisting of various laws — that determines behaviour and as "*an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life*" (Geertz, 1973: 89).

More contemporary definitions, however, stipulate that culture is a tool for problem solving in such a way that it enables individuals to make sense of the behaviour of others, therefore introducing the process of 'sense-making' and 'interpreting' to what the construct of culture entails (D'Andrade, 1981, Hannerz, 1992; Trompenaars, 1993). Culture then, is simultaneously manifested and interpreted in a given social context, and in relation to other individuals.

These various theorizations of culture reveal that culture's multidimensionality derives, in part, from being simultaneously made up of various elements (i.e., its basic assumptions, values, beliefs and meanings), the dynamic interaction of these elements with each other (culture as a problem-solving tool, transmitted system), and the context in which they occur (see Hatch, 1993). The challenge is to identify the initial conditions (sources of values) and the emergent conditions (situation) of a manifested cultural behaviour.

In recent attempts to address this challenge, various scholars have stipulated that culture's complexity fosters the multiplicity of cultural identities (Holliday, 2010; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2011; Sackmann & Phillips, 2004; Taras et al., 2009; Tung, 2008). For example, Roccas and Brewer (2002) introduced the concept of social identity complexity, which discusses how the individual's subjective representation of the inter-relationships among his or her multiple group identities can result in a complex and multifaceted cultural identity.

In line with these conceptualizations, several scholars have sought to present culture as a construct composed of multiple facets (Bezrukova, Thatcher, Jehn, & Spell, 2012; Fitzsimmons, 2013; Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Gibson & McDaniel, 2010). Emphasizing this, Schneider and Barsoux (2003) propose that individuals are influenced by the different 'cultural spheres' they encounter and inhabit at work, including nationality, profession, industry, company, even function, with each sphere having its own set of artefacts, values and assumptions. Individuals' observed behaviour is therefore derived from the interaction among these 'spheres'.

2.2. Culture as a multidimensional construct: moving beyond national culture

Given the multiple cultural dimensions theory, the weaknesses in the conventional research approach, *pace* Hofstede and Trompenaars, of predominantly conceptualizing culture at the national level, become self-evident (see Tsui, Nifadkar, & Amy, 2007). Indeed, associating an individual's culture with their nationality, and seeking to predict their behaviour based on presumed shared values and similarities in thinking at the national level, has few supporters (Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2011). This is because individuals can acquire multiple self-conceptions (e.g. nationality, organization, religion, etc.), and draw from their full set of cultural memberships in order to display specific behaviour appropriate to the relevant obligations of the situation, with the potential for conflicting features (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). As Hong, Wan, No, and Chi state: "*When individuals become experts in more than one culture, their social information processing is channelled through the lenses of more than one culture, and their interpretive biases could be pushed in the direction of one or the other culture by the presence of cultural cues*