



INTERVIEW

The science and art of learning about cultures: Descriptions, explanations, and reflections In conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Founder, Art of Living

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Abstract National cultural differences pose major obstacles to global business expansion. Managers, therefore, seek to learn more about cultures. Conventional managerial learning mostly draws from descriptive scientific models which have potential drawbacks such as unidimensionality, decontextualisation, and culture-level information. Explanatory models of cultural psychology can help overcome these limitations. Further, insights from a cross-culturally fluent authority provide reflective learnings. Toward this end, I engage in a conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of the Art of Living organization, on issues related to cultural identity in the global workplace in the Indian context.

Introduction

Cultural intelligence, cultural competences, and cultural adaptability are the buzzwords in contemporary business literature (e.g., Molinsky, Daveport, Iyer, & Davidson, 2012). Academic researchers and business managers cannot brush these aside as jargon. Contrary to the popular assumption that the “world is flat” (Friedman, 2005),

empirical data suggests that a failure to bridge the cultural distance is one of the major reasons why intercultural connectedness is sub-optimal at the individual and the organisational level (Ghemawat, 2007; Ghemawat & Altman, 2012). Why are cultural differences posing such a challenge to business managers?

One possible reason could be that there is a dearth of reliable information on cross-cultural difference—managers must depend on mainstream media, rules-of-thumb, and anecdotal stories in their cross-national ventures, and learn about cultures through trial-and-error. However, the availability of scientific literature on cross-cultural differences, often re-written for the lay audience (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2013; Nisbett, 2003), contradicts this idea.

Moreover, most global organisations have instituted formal practices of cultural learning. For example,

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Goldman Sachs, in 2009, launched cross-cultural training programmes, aptly called “cultural dojo” in Japan (Nakamoto, 2012) and “cultural yoga” in India. HSBC’s “World’s Local Bank” ad campaign is well known. The “cross cultural knowledge industry” (Segalla, Fischer, & Sander, 2000, p. 42), comprising professional trainers (Littrell & Salas, 2005) and consultants, is proliferating. Therefore, there is less reason to believe in the lack of learning resources.

The other possible reason for limited appreciation and sensitivity to cross-cultural differences—the one that I discuss in detail in this paper—is that the learning content for managers mostly draws from descriptive scientific models. The explanatory models, offered by cultural psychology, are an underutilised resource that can help the manager analyse and appreciate the cultural differences better. I substantiate my point by taking the example of cultural differences in personal choice and external control.

In addition, the experiential process of cross-cultural research and managerial learning is informed by the art of reflection (related concepts that emphasise curiosity and a creative flair for understanding one’s cultural experiences include “cultural metacognition,” Earley & Ang, 2003; “cultural mindfulness,” Thomas, 2006). Along with personal insights and observations, reflection includes conversations with cultural experts who have first-hand experience living and interacting with people of diverse cultures. Toward this end, I engage in a conversation with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for his insights on cultural identity in the global workplace, especially in the context of India.

Descriptions of culture

Cross-cultural management

The subject matter of managerial learning is commonly derived from the academic discipline of cross-cultural management. The scope of the discipline is: “Cross-cultural management *describes* organisational behaviour within countries and cultures; *compares* organisational behaviour across countries and cultures; and, perhaps, most important, seeks to understand and improve the *interaction* of co-workers, managers, clients, suppliers, and alliance partners from countries and cultures around the world.” (Adler, 2002, p.11, emphasis in original). The subject matter of this discipline draws mainly from the scholarly works of anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976), cross-cultural management researchers Geert Hofstede (1980), F. Trompenaars (1993), and the more recent GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, Javidan, Dorfman, Sully, & House, 2006). Two defining features of the subject matter are:

Bipolar dimensions

In the conceptual culture-as-iceberg model (Hofstede, 1980), the tip of the iceberg comprises observable and tangible differences in cultures, say, in dress, language, and food habits. The hidden or the underlying intangible dimensions—identified through ethnography and/or survey research—comprise the core of culture. Conceptually,

these dimensions are bipolar scales or continua along which the cultures can be rank-ordered as “high” or “low”. Osland and Bird (2000) identified 22 dimensions commonly found in the literature. For example, Hofstede’s (1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) well-known dimensions comprise individualism/collectivism, power distance (high/low), masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance (high/low), and long-/short-term orientation. Most countries around the world are rank-ordered on these dimensions (Hofstede, 1980).

Observable behaviours and cultural practices

The dimensions are conceptual and systematic abstractions of the real world. These map on to observable cultural practices and individual behaviours. For example, Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism dimension is associated with the following behaviours: the word “I” is encouraged in individualistic cultures and avoided in collectivistic cultures; media is the primary source of information in individualistic cultures whereas social network is the primary source of information in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010). The literature is laden with descriptions of the characteristic features associated with a particular dimension. These descriptions, mainly, draw from ethnographic study, participant observations and survey research.

Critique of the dimensional approach

Whereas the dimensional approach is comprehensive, in that it allows for comparisons of many countries simultaneously along a common set of dimensions, it has the following limitations:

Unidimensionality

Because cultures are marked high or low on one-dimensional constructs, cultures tend to get typecast one way versus the other. There is little help to make sense of the instances that do not fit the generalisation. Osland and Bird (2000) call the dimensional approach as “sophisticated stereotyping” (p.74) and warn that “Sophisticated stereotyping should be the beginning of cultural learning, not the end, as is so often the case when teaching or learning about culture” (Osland & Bird, 2000, p.74). For example, in a 1991 survey, many Costa Rican customers—members of a collectivistic culture—preferred automatic tellers over human tellers because “at least the machines are programmed to say ‘good morning’ and ‘thank you’” (cited in Osland & Bird, 2000). Dimensional models do not account for such anomalies.

Decontextualised

Cultural dimensions do not account for the influence of situational contexts (Sinha & Tripathi, 2003; Søderberg & Holden, 2002). Might an individual behave in culturally atypical ways given the situation and circumstances? For example, Sinha and Tripathi (2003) note that India occupies a curious position in the individualism—collectivism dimension: Hofstede (1980) originally predicted that India would occupy a very low point on his Individualism scale. In fact, India scored 48, compared with 91 for the United States and 12 for Venezuela. Indian social psychologists argue that

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