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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION INTRODUCTION

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the nature of culture and its roles in human development.
- Explain the need for cross-cultural communication.
- Explain the Tree model of cultural elements, and stratify diverse cultural elements according to this model.
- Explain the Inverted Pyramid model of cultural analysis, and position a cultural encounter in the correct layer of the model for analysis.
- Explain the nature of globalization by using the Tree model and the Inverted Pyramid model.

The nature of culture

Culture or genes?

Let's start with an example.

In 2006, Ms. Sandra Piovesan, 50, was found bleeding to death after being mauled by a pack of nine hybrid wolves that she raised as pets. The pups grew up in her backyard, were treated like her children, and according to Ms Piovesan, had given her “unqualified love”¹. Unfortunately, similar cases such as this are not uncommon. No matter how close the human-animal relationship is, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that a wolf will be a wolf, and the wolf's genes tell it to hunt and attack, possibly including the human who raised it. Information stocked in its genes decides what it eats, how it moves, and what sound it makes. In short, a wolf does not behave like a human despite living with humans. Its genes overrule the social environment.

Now consider the reverse. In 1920, two little girls were found living with a band of wolves in Northern India. They seemed to have no trace of humanness and had the minds of wolves. The feral girls tore off any clothes put on them and would only eat raw meat. They slept curled up together in a tight ball and growled and twitched in their sleep. They only came awake after the moon rose and howled to be let free again. They crawled on all fours, never smiled, and the only emotion that crossed their faces was fear. Their eyes were supernaturally sharp at night and would glow in the dark like a cat's. They could smell a lump of meat right across the orphanage's three acre yard². All in all, it was obvious that the girls were more like wolves in a human body. The human genes somehow failed to tell them that they were human, that they should stand on two legs, speak a certain language, and behave in a human way. In short, while a wolf does not behave like humans despite living with humans, a human tends to behave like a wolf when living with wolves. For the wolves, their *genes overrule the social environment*. For humans, the reverse is true, their *genes give way to the social environment*.

What does this tell us about the crucial role of *social environment*? In fact, it actually tells us nearly everything that separates us humans from other animals. In 2013, Mark Pagel published a groundbreaking book titled *Wired for culture*, praised by the prominent journal *Nature* to be “the best popular science book on culture so far”³. Approached from evolutionary biology, Pagel argues that social interaction, or culture, is in its last stage of replacing genes to give humans guidance on how to deal with survival issues. Unlike other animals, we are much less dependent on our genes to tell us what to do. Instead of taking all information from the pool of DNA that we inherit from our parents, we take most information from culture: the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the tools we make and use, the language we speak, the Gods we believe in, the people we consider as friends and the guys we should fight and kill in a war. Basically, all human beings are born with a very receptive mind to absorb the first culture seen, and consequently become actors in that culture. That is why feral children behave according to their wolves' culture, and not according to their human genes. A wolf brought up by sheep (or humans, for that matter) will remain a wolf and soon turn on its benefactors. But a newborn human must be ready to join any cultural group on Earth, ready to behave according to that culture: cold Iceland, hot dry central Africa, tropical Bangladesh, nomad Arabia, or even a wolves' den in the deep Indian forest, and to speak the language of that culture.

But why have we, in the course of two million years, gradually stopped getting the rules of daily living from our genes, and finally taken more of the guidance from our culture instead?

Let's have a comparison. Your genes can only make any changes and be improved when we reproduce the next generation in a different body. That takes a long time. Unlike genes, elements of cultures could jump directly from one mind to another, shortcutting the normal genetic routes of transmission. On top of that, genes are fixed. You are stuck from birth with sets of genes given by your parents. Unlike genes, culture is a vast store of continuously better information, improved technologies, broadened knowledge and wisdom. You can sample throughout your life from that sea of evolving ideas, adopting, considering, changing, rejecting, improving, accumulating...etc, all within a lifetime.

Not surprisingly, then, culture has gradually evolved in the last two million years to become a survival strategy of our species, has slowly but surely taken over the running of our day-to-day affairs, and has been providing us with many solutions to problems of our existence. With our capacity of *social learning*, we no longer completely rely on genetic improvement such as better wings, feathers, shells, claws, poisons...etc to improve our survival. We have cultures with accumulated ideas and knowledge that are shared and passed down through generations. This makes us a powerful species, one without suitable genetic physicality but still able to fly higher than any birds, conquer the deserts, live in a submarine, and spread to all corners of the world. We are no longer confined to one environment, but are able to transform the environment to suit our needs. As Pagel observes, suppose we come back in a million years, our close genetic relatives the chimpanzees would still be sitting in the forest using the same old stone cracking the same old nut, because their genes tell them to do so. In the meantime, thanks to culture, humans have built skyscrapers and spaceships.

At this point, it is clear that the definition of culture, for our purpose, should contain the recurring theme of survival strategies through social learning. We therefore have chosen a definition from Triandis⁴ because it is the closest to what we are looking for, and adapted as the following: "Culture is a set of evolving man-made elements that have increased the probability of survival, and thus become shared among those who could communicate with each other".

Why do we have so many different cultures?

Language is one of our defining traits as humans, but we are probably the only animal in which two individuals might not be able to communicate with each other, almost as two different biological species. Even when they seem to speak the same language, different accents can make mutual understanding very challenging. That is why we can be so wrong in assuming that people in the Middle East naturally understand each other because most of them speak Arabic. By comparison, an elephant would not have so much trouble knowing what to do if it is placed amongst other herds of elephants. All in all, we are one species physically, but language is a sure sign that seems to tell us that we are not.

There are two mainstream theories that explain our cultural diversity. One is called environmental determinism, advocating that diversity in living environments is the major reason why our societies developed in different ways. Jared Diamond for example, argues that the number of wild plants and animals suitable for domestication was the initial deciding factor that led to surplus food production, consequently to a growth in human populations, and other developments⁵. However, this theory obviously cannot explain why a tiny patch of land like Papua New Guinea has more than 800 different languages. Here, it is not uncommon to encounter a different tribe with a different language within a few miles. The anthropologist Don Kulick gave one example of the Buian tribe which

purposely fostered linguistic diversity by switching all its masculine and feminine gender agreements, so that their language would be different from the neighbours' dialects⁶.

The fact that we tend to diverge into sub-groups in densely populated areas can be puzzling, but will become understandable if the element of resources joins the big picture. The second theory of diversity advocates that since culture is a survival strategy, ideas and knowledge can be stolen by one group at the expense of the other. In a desire to control resources, people expand into different sub-groups. *Cultural diversity becomes an element for us to recognize an in-group we can trust.* It rests on the notion that because this person has the same cultural traits (the way he/she dresses, the way he/she communicates, the values he/she holds dear...), it is highly likely that we are in the same group and I can trust this person. Language becomes a significant mechanism to safeguard culture, and thus, safeguard knowledge and information in competition with other groups. This process of separation is most powerful in environmentally rich areas such as Papua New Guinea, which as a matter of fact, was the cradle of agriculture 10, 000 years ago. In a nutshell, we can say that as long as resources allow, it is our inherent tendency to split off and form a sub-group, thus creating vast cultural diversity.

In this reader, we will use a combination of both theories. We argue that environmental determinism is powerful in tracing back the origin of different cultural values while evolutionary biology explains the ever ongoing nature of diversity in our cultural psyche.

Cross-cultural communication

Globalization

At this point, some healthy scepticism would lead to this question: "If our cultures tend to differ from one another, why do we have this seemingly unavoidable globalization where cultural boundaries seem to be more blurry than ever?"

Having a look around, it is hard not to notice that societies are increasingly converging on similar patterns. When Marshall McLuhan coined the concept of "global village", he was referring to Plato's definition of a city's proper population with a number of people who live within the range of a public speaker, i.e. ideally up to his magic number of 5040 citizens. Nowadays, technology has replaced the public speaker and connected billions of people via networks of media, commerce, and immigrations. However, is globalization a new phenomenon?

According to Pagel, with abundant resources, cultures drive people into sub-groups because it is possible for a small group to keep knowledge to themselves and still survive. The structure of small groups works well because within small local culture, fortunately, instead of acting totally instinctively with instruction from genes, humans have learned, accumulated knowledge, and eventually reached the point of being willing to cooperate with members of a different blood line. From here, humans have steadily evolved so far that we are capable of beating the family-bound sociality that is typical of the animal kingdom. In order to control resources more effectively, we no longer just care about our own kinship, but are capable of bringing down the genetic fence and welcoming strangers into our circle of trust. During the last 10, 000 years, cooperation with others has steadily proved to be a successful strategy that returns better outcomes than endless conflicts and revenge. The consequence of this process is that humans become involved in larger and larger groups and communities. In a timely example, Pagel suggests that the reason other EU countries are

willing to bail out Greece is simply because the money they are giving away is worth less than the cost to their own economies if Greece defaults. In the end, richer Eurozone countries keep more of their wealth by giving quite a lot of it away. The very psychology that enables us to form groups larger than family is the driving force that allows us to create an ever increasingly interconnected world.

The history of mankind has witnessed constant growth of the cooperation process that transformed small tribes into chiefdoms, then chiefdoms to nascent city-states, city-states to nation states, and nation states to collections of nations such as the European Union. As the next logical step, we are of course talking about the “global village”, or in other words: globalization.

In short, globalization is not something completely new. It is the ultimate stage of a *cultural adaption* process with which humans have been psychologically endowed to cope with effective resource ownership, diversity, and other problems in the course of existence.

The driving forces for cross-cultural communication

At this point, it should be clear to us that culture as a survival strategy has created two contrasting incentives: (1) the tendency to divide people in to sub-groups to protect knowledge and to recognize those they can trust; and (2) the tendency to seek cooperation beyond groups in order to manage resources more effectively. We see this situation every day. For any cultural community, along with its endless calls to honour and preserve cultural heritage, there is always an effort to seek allies. For example, Flemish speaking people are very proud of their culture and language outright, but at the same time, they are willing to keep the status quo of being an integral part of three completely different countries.

Of course it is not just resources which create incentives to seek cooperation with people beyond our kinship. There are other issues of international development we are facing nowadays that our ancestors did not have to deal with. Technology and information systems have reduced distance between people. In a matter of decades, traditional methods of information exchange that we have known for thousands of years were swept away. What took us weeks and months to receive (a letter for example) can now be achieved with the click of a mouse. It is not the change, but the *speed of change* that is so mind-blowing that back in 1970 Toffler was already inspired to call it “future shock”, a psychological state of having to cope with too much change in too short a period of time⁷. Going abroad, meeting people from different communities, or coping with a cultural clash are no longer a once- in- a- lifetime event. With technology flattening any distance obstacles, millions of people experience new cultures, customs and beliefs...etc on a daily basis, something that our parents and (grand) grandparents only had a few times in their life, and something that only the most adventurous of our ancestors got a chance to experience.

Next, the impetus for international contact is heavily attributed to an unprecedented rapid increase in and redistribution of the world’s population. Around 360,000 new babies are born each day, 133 million each year, and more than 230,000 million people live outside the country of their birth and that is not counting immigrants and their descendants and massive global diasporas. This unprecedented increase in size and large-scaled redistribution add a burden to resources, the planet’s ecosystem, and increase the likelihood of conflicts. Distance no longer matters. We all share vital natural resources such as oil and water; an African drought may be partly responsible for a decline in

Caribbean Sea coral. September 11 is just one example to show that no geographically isolated country is immune to conflict. We have become so interconnected that nobody is untouchable.

Last, but of course not least, we are seeing a global economy like never before. Individual economies around the world are so closely interwoven that an event in one country is bound to affect the state of others. Take the global financial crisis for example. The year before the crisis saw a flood of irresponsible mortgage lending in America. These risky mortgages were passed on to financial engineers at the big banks, who miscalculated the securities. When America's housing market turned, a chain reaction exposed fragilities in the financial system, and finally, the collapse of a sprawling global bank called Lehman Brothers in September 2008 almost brought down the world's financial system. In the global economy, one guy sneezes and everyone catches a cold.

We are living in a world where diverse people are brought together at speeds that exceed those at which they can be successfully culturally integrated. Because of this, no nations, groups, or culture can remain aloof or autonomous. More than ever in the history of mankind, cultural adaptation is vital, because cross-cultural contacts are pervasive and unavoidable.

The Tree model of culture

The elements of culture

If you were asked to name everything that “culture” contains, the list is almost unlimited. However, three groups of elements can be identified. First, there are universal, generic and fundamental elements of *concern* such as family, politics, arts, religion...etc. These are the building blocks of our culture, the very foundation of human's social learning environment which makes us different from other animals as we have discussed in the first section “culture or genes”. Second, there are norms and *values* that project our moral positions on those fundamental elements, such as family-orientation or individual dependency; or democratic, secular, liberal or authoritarian government. Third, there are myriads of *objects*, *symbols* and *actions* that are outward expressions of the last two: specific kinds of clothes, specific tools such as a laptop, specific styles of houses and architecture, specific words and documents, specific policies...etc.

What group of elements do we mostly observe in our everyday's life? Obviously it is the third one. We do not see a “value” such as the “secular” political system but we can read its specific laws, watching how its state authorities advocate that secular value in specific words and actions. Can what we see deceive us? Yes, unfortunately most of the time, because what we see is just the outward expression of the whole system. Think of culture as a tree with three layers: its trunk, its branches, and its massive canopies of twigs and leaves (Figure 1). When looking at this tree from a birds-eye view, flying on top of it, and seeing only the leaves, we assume to ourselves: “Yes, I've seen the (whole) tree!”

The underlying message is: What we see is just a very small part of the whole. Fundamental life concerns and values lay deep under the forest. We cannot rush above it and expect a thorough understanding. You need to get “down to earth”, be on your feet, stand next to the tree, and observe it. More importantly, this model warns us that superficial donning of food, music, or clothes does not mean someone has changed his/her cultural values. An urban Indian boy who wears Nike is not automatically someone who has stripped off his Indian culture. No matter how much he loves his life style, if he is a typical and average Indian person, he will neatly remove his Nikes before entering a

Hindu temple. Why? Because deep down in his heart, this specific Indian value of showing high regard for holy places is rooted.

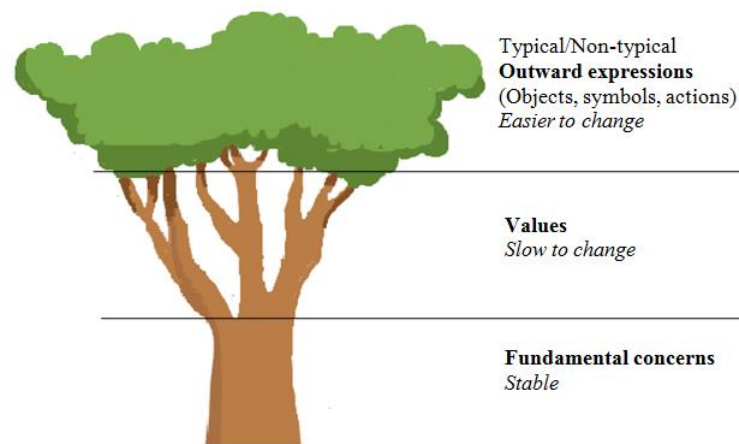


Figure 1. The Tree model of Culture (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2014)

The change in culture

Will a tree stay the same all the time? Of course it won't. For a mature one, every part of it is constantly on the move, albeit each layer has a very different speed. The leaves change regularly, quickly and are easy to see. The branches change much slower, almost impossible to see. And the trunk almost always looks the same.

Like a tree, culture is a constant process, a source of knowledge accumulated for us to take guidance from instead of our genes. However, culture changes at different speed patterns at different layers. Our fundamental concerns are subjected to the least amount of change. It is safe to say that despite our seemingly fast development, the center of our worries and interests does not depart much from very essential issues: from food and security to natural resources and governing structure, from sex and power to law and education, from family and reproduction to the marriage institution and religion...etc. These are the fundamental blocks of our own existence, the very foundation of who we are as a species.

At the second layer of the Tree model, values indicate a moral position towards a fundamental concern. This moral position changes very slowly, over a long period of time. For example, family bonding is a fundamental concern, and the moral position that Vietnamese people have towards this concern is extremely high. This value plays a crucial role in boosting the nation's private economic sectors where 40% of the people state that their major motivation in setting up business is to support their kin. However, with the newly found prosperity, the family bond is slowly weakening. Wealth is a powerful influence and it gradually pushes cultural values from traditional to progressive, from collectivistic to individualistic. Does this mean one day the Vietnamese values will be the same as other developed countries' values? Probably not, because the whole world is moving in more or less the same direction of development. Compared to a few hundred years ago for example, people worldwide have become generally wealthier, healthier, and more educated; the political system has become somewhat more democratic; children have become more independent; gender disparity has become less...etc. As all countries are moving forward, although with different speed, the gap between them stays more or less similar. No matter how much the moral position towards family

bonding in Vietnam is changing due to economic growth, compared to countries on the other end of the scale (i.e. weak family bonding), the Vietnamese can still be considered as being very attached to their families. Remembering this argument enables us to avoid one of the most common mistakes we make in discussion: “Oh, but everything there is changing so fast, people are not the same anymore”. That may be true, but don’t forget that our values are also not the same anymore when compared with our own past. The whole world does not just stop and stand to watch some of its parts changing.

Of all the three levels, the top layer of the Tree model changes the fastest. We constantly have new things every day, and we do different things on different days. Let’s stick to the example of family bonding. While our fundamental concern of family bonding is stable, the value we attach to a strong or weak family bond can slowly change over a long period of time, and the way we express our bond changes rapidly in terms of specific words, symbols and actions. There are different things we tell people in our family every day, and there are specific things we do for them every day. It can hurt, it can heal, it can build, or it can crash. But above all, it is a fast flow of endless words, things, and actions that we use to express how bonded we are with our family. In short, these outward expressions constantly create our tangible world, the very living cells of our life.

The typical and non-typical elements of the same value

When we look at a culture, mostly what we can see with our naked eye is a constant change of outward expressions. Because these elements evolve rapidly at the top layer, they do not always “match” with the guiding values at the second layer. In other words, a part of outward expression reflects a culture’s values, and the rest does not. For example, while the core value of the Vietnamese is strong family bonding, you will see that many couples in this country have chosen not to live with their senile parents as usually happened in the past. This action does not quite reflect the value, but it doesn’t automatically mean that these people have stripped off their deep-rooted value. Our Indian boy can wear a pair of Nikes but may hold the traditional culture of India as strongly as any man who always dresses in the traditional dhoti. Many Muslim girls may fully veil themselves and pray five times a day, but it is possible that they are no less progressive than any women who have chosen more casual and generic outfits. The change of outward expression does not always mean the change of values. We will be misled if we only look at these ever changing superficial elements and give judgement on the deep-rooted value, simply because *the same value can produce both typical and non-typical outward expressions*.

Cultural identities

With this analogy of culture as a Tree in mind, we can now speak of *dominant culture* (or mainstream culture) and *co-culture*, which is evident in most countries nowadays, especially in places with a recent history of immigration. The dominant culture refers to a group that usually has the greatest amount of control, but not necessarily the biggest group in size. Take the US for example; in 2013, half of the under-5 age group was made up of racial and ethnic minorities, and by 2043, the white majority in this country will be history. Although white males now constitute only 34% of the population, they control most of the cultural messages, and thus influence others’ thinking and doing. Their positions of power determine the political decision-making process, as well as economic and religious institutions.

However, a national culture is never a homogeneous thing of one piece. Co-cultures exist, to be found within the dominant culture but at the same time having their distinct and unique patterns of

communication. Co-cultures can be different ethnicities (for example almost 20% of the Dutch population are immigrants or children of immigrant parents), religions (such as the Muslim who account for 18% in Israel), or have a different sexual orientation (such as 2.5% of the Australian men and 2.2% of the women who self-identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bi-sexual⁸). The list goes on, as co-culture affiliations can be based on location (e.g. regional culture), profession (e.g. army culture), work (e.g. organizational culture), age (e.g. teenage culture), capacity (e.g. deaf culture), life style (e.g. gothic culture)...etc. The notion of co-cultures next to the dominant culture indicates that a person can be a member of multiple cultures, belonging to more than just one culture, and being able to self-develop in a culturally selective way. Anyone can thus have multiple identities, belonging to multiple dominant cultures and co-cultures. A French citizen is very likely to be a French, a Moroccan, a Muslim, an Arab, a Parisian, a police officer, a mother, a vegetarian, a pro-choice activist... all at the same time. And this particular person can develop her own profile, select her most responsive identities to deal with a myriad of situations in everyday life. The same goes for yourself, myself, and everyone else.

The Inverted Pyramid model and three levels of cultural analysis

The Inverted Pyramid model

One of the major points for debate in the study of cross-cultural communication is the skewed focus on culture as a group phenomenon. This group's point of view underscores the roles of individuals and the universal and fundamental foundation of human nature, both of which are impossible to avoid when we discuss or analyze a cross-cultural encounter. It is crucial to remember that the starting point of our interaction with people from different cultures is mostly a shared concern, which is not group-specific. As discussed in earlier sections, culture has a tendency to motivate us to go beyond kinship, seeking cooperation in order to manage resources effectively. Next, the end point that internalizes and externalizes cultural values in any cross-cultural incidents, as argued by Barnard⁹, has to do with the *mind*, and that, in every case, is individual.

Now consider a conceptual model that represents all related levels, inspired by a model of Hofstede¹⁰. It starts with *universal* at the bottom, which indicates our similarity in the biological system of our body and in our world view. Before entering an interaction with people from different cultures, it is crucial to keep in mind that we are all human beings with a great deal of shared interest and concern, and that we are first and foremost the same in the sense that we have to deal with basically similar problems with more or less the same inherited human capacity, motivated by more or less the same willingness to get them solved. To incorporate this with the Tree model, at this level, we have certain sets of universal and fundamental concerns (our eternal issues of work, family, security, ambition, conflicts, freedom...etc), certain sets of universal values (empathy from loved ones; some degree of freedom, some degree of certainty or hedonism, power and achievement...etc), certain sets of universal outward expressions (generic survival tools and activities...etc). Culture at this level is universal, shared by all and understood by all (Figure 2).

The second layer of the Inverted Pyramid is *collective*. At this level, we start to differ from each other with patterns of differences which occur in various degrees. Most cross-cultural studies focus on this level. Although all of us have similar universal concerns, cultural diversity would interpret those concerns at *different levels of importance*. The same counts for values and outward

expressions. For example, at the universal level, we all care about child bearing (concern) and the crucial role of fidelity (value). However, each community places different degrees of emphasis on this concern, value and its consequential action. For example, those who live in societies of abundant low-yielding communal land farmed by labor-intensive technologies embrace polygyny because this family form takes the most advantage of the significant agricultural surpluses. The more wives and children, the more land can be tended, the larger and more affluent a family can become. Sexual fidelity of the wives is not a top priority, as all children born to a man's wives are legally his. This family model makes child bearing much more of an essential concern than other societies since each additional wife and her children permit the family to farm more territory and to achieve economies of scale in domestic labor and trade. Now compare this with other societies that have traditional subsistence agriculture on privately owned farms. They tend to practice monogamous marriage with strong cultural safeguards for the sexual fidelity of women because it is important that family lands be passed to those who share a blood line¹¹. This example shows us that although we seem to share universal concerns and values, at the collective level, we do differ in our view of how important these values and concerns are.

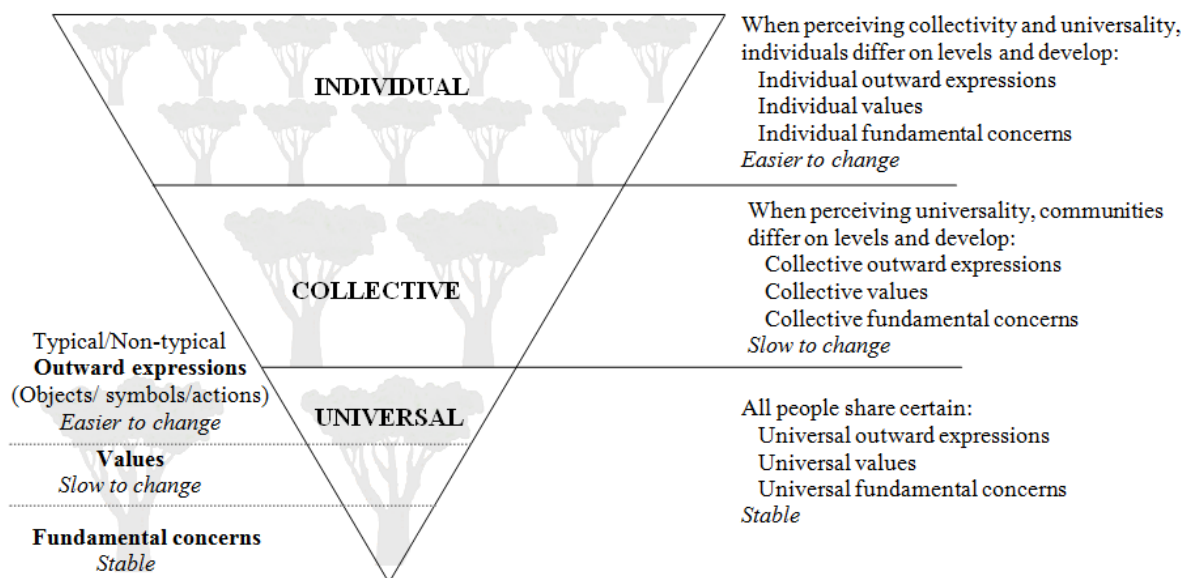


Figure 2. The Inverted Pyramid model (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2014)

When cross-cultural communication occurs at the collective level, the differences in our degrees of perceiving universal concerns clash, our degrees of perceiving guiding values clash, and our expressions through objects, symbols and actions clash. The nature of these clashes is simply the difference in the way we think how much significance ought to be attached to a concern, a value, or an action that we all care about. More often than not, we seem incapable of explaining these clashes. Why? Because within our own collective culture, those concerns, guiding values and outward expressions are taken for granted as something everybody knows and there is little reason to discuss. They are widely shared and accepted as natural. Consequently, there is a lack of common vocabulary to talk about it when cross-cultural problems occur. Since cultural clashes stem from similar concern and values at the universal level, most clashes are well-meaning. Molded by our differences in perception, we deal with these universally shared issues in a flow of action and language that we believe to be proper *from our own perspectives*, unaware that what is proper for us can be extremely inappropriate for others who judge our outward expressions from different levels of concerns and

different moral positions towards common values. For example, building trust is a universally shared concern and trustworthiness is universally accepted as a crucial value. However, we tend to misjudge the *importance level* of trust building in different cultures. For some, it is “I trust you as a friend. That is why we can do business together”, and for others it is “I don’t have to totally trust you as a friend because the business contract can give me the trust I need”. In this example, you can clearly see that the value of social trust differs in levels in two cultures: the one needs total trust to start up a corporation, while the other places less significance on social trust and expects to compensate this lack with a business contract (legal trust). With the same example, we can also see that different cultures not only differ in how they see the value of social trust, but how to express it within the outward layer of words, symbols and actions. We may all want to build trust, but we probably build it with different actions: in some cultures direct eye contact is expected while in others, it is a sign of disrespect. As Sitaram and Cogdell remind us, “Reality is not the same for all people”¹², because reality is always being interpreted by our differing levels of concerns, guiding values and specific ways of outward expression.

However, not everything at this collective level happens neatly according to collective norms. Looking at the outward expression of any society, one will be amazed at how often something happens that contradict the dominant value, no matter how strong these core guiding values are. A political party, a policy, a movement, or school curriculum, or even a movie can show a completely non-typical aspect of a collective culture. For example, many people must struggle to understand why a TV series that features only pathetic losers such as “The Big Bang Theory” gains so much popularity in a country that is so well known for its competitive spirit and “from rag to riches” mentality. Similarly, the bishōnen trend in Japan is a powerful example of non-typical elements at the collective level. Literally meaning “beautiful youth (boy)”, bishōnen describes a young man whose beauty transcends the boundary of gender or sexual orientation. The bishōnen is typically slender, with clear and fair skin, stylish hair, and distinctly feminine facial features such as high cheekbones and pouty lips, but simultaneously retains a male body. This social phenomenon is popular among both boys and girls because it provides a non-traditional outlet for the conventionally strict gender relations in conservative and masculine Japan, breaking down stereotypes surrounding feminine male characters.

The third layer of the Inverted Pyramid is *individual*. At this level, we do not only differ from each other in group-pattern but every single one of us differs completely from one another. Each person is unique and different, even among those who share the same collective system. A man born and raised in Yemen may or may not carry with him typical traits of the Yemeni culture such as having fierce tribal attachment and being a conservative believer (value), chewing qat or wearing a dagger (outward expressions). This particular person may have learned Yemeni cultural values from his family and others, but he interprets, adapts, and chooses how to apply these values in his own individual way, with his own specific set of objects, symbols, and actions. Unlike the Indian boy with his Nikes who has non-typical outward expression but holds the *same value* with his Indian culture, in this case, the Yemeni man has non-typical outward expression and *different values* towards his culture. He is a non-typical case both inside and outside. It is hard to overemphasize that people are more than their collective cultures. No matter how dominant and pervasive a value is among a society, you will always see individuals whose values and outward expression completely contradict what the majority in that culture seems to adhere to. On this layer of the Inverted Pyramid model, not everyone is typical of their culture.

The importance of observing culture from all three analysis levels

Any understanding of all cross-cultural issues should take root in all three layers of analysis, since it provides us with a big picture and at the same time, helps us link all details and make sense of it. One of the most fundamental criticisms of culture studies is that many theories tend to focus on the collective level while most of the time, we are not dealing with a culture but individuals from that culture, or even more complex, individuals from different cultures. The focus on the collective level makes us stray from our shared starting point of universal goals, emphasizing group differences and downplaying individual power.

For example, many of us tend to blame some business cultures as corrupt and prone to bribes, as if we are the opposite, completely pure and transparent. In fact, the Inverted Pyramid model tells us that corruption exists everywhere (universal), just more obvious in a particular culture and less in others (collective). There is also no absolute foundation to assume that a business partner, although coming from a culture reputed for practicing bribes, is going to accept bribes (individual). Everyone can differ from the cultural baggage he/she was born into, so much that a 100% typical Thai or a typical Brazilian almost never exists. On top of that, the differences between us can all be traced back to the similarities we share at the universal level. We may obey authority in different ways but in the end, obedience towards authorities is universal. We may express love for our country in different ways but in the end, patriotism is universal. It is impossible to overemphasize that *we are not different in kind, we are just different in level*.

Next, the incorporation of the Tree model reminds us that for every non-typical thing we see, every non-typical behavior we observe, every non-typical policy or document we have at hand...there are always two possibilities. The first guess we may have is that this non-typical outward expression is just a superficial change at the leaves' layer, while deep down at the branches' layer, the same guiding value is still intact. The second guess is that this non-typical outward expression goes hand in hand with a change of value compared with the dominant moral position. Knowing the difference in these two possibilities is crucial in understanding culture, since *what we see can be either "what it is", or "what it is not"*.

If we agree on those two stands, then we have created a solid foundation to move on in the understanding of all chapters that will appear in this book. You will be familiarized with the framework of Hall, an American anthropologist considered to be one of the founding fathers of intercultural communication. According to him, cultures differ along seven dimensions, and we will place a strong emphasis on High-Low context, Monochronic-Polychronic and Proxemics (space). Most of these cultural dimensions have more to do with verbal and non-verbal communication than norms and values, i.e. they are more related to the top layer of our Tree model.

Next to Hall, we will learn about Hofstede and Trompenaars and their frameworks of observing cultures along value dimensions. Unlike Hall, these prominent Dutch researchers focus more on the second layer of the Tree model. What really puts them, especially Hofstede, on the pedestal of intercultural communication is their attempt to put value dimensions on measurement. So while with Hall's theories, we can only describe a culture as *very* Monochronic, Hofstede actually came up with a number on a 100-point scale. One example of his value is Power Distance which describes our socially accepted gap in authority. The Inverted Pyramid model tells us that Power Distance universally exists everywhere since human beings are hierarchical. However, in some societies, the accepted gap between authority and subordinate is much wider than others; for example Mexico

scores 81 while the UK scores 35. At the individual level, of course, there is likelihood that a person may carry the same dominant culture's Power Distance traits, so a Mexican is more likely to have High Power Distance. However, it is only a prediction because this person can turn out to be either High or Low Power Distance, or anywhere in between. In the case of very competent cross-cultural communication, in order to suit each particular circumstance, this person can understand, change and adapt behaviors depending on where, when, and with whom he/she is communicating, regardless from which culture he/she comes. Ultimately, this is the result we would like to see in the future generation of truly global citizens or international business people (read: YOU). Some mechanisms to develop this cultural sensitivity will be discussed towards the end of this course.

The history of Intercultural Communication has witnessed a few other frameworks with many more cultural value dimensions. However, the three authors chosen in this reader are the most prominent, both in the wider arena of social research and in a business context.

International business and cross-cultural communication

Why do we have to learn about cultures if we have a global economy?

As discussed in the earlier section, the global economy has unfurled a closely interwoven network of economies that are dependent on one another to different degrees. However, it is wrong to assume that we are living in a global village and globalization is nullifying cultural boundaries. Interestingly, globalization is the very reason for the revival of local culture identities.

At the collective level of the Inverted Pyramid model, when different values come into direct conflict, they tend to clash with each other, and even strengthen their own distinguished traits more firmly. Why? The first reason is that cultural values are the stable branches of the Tree model, which can be difficult and slow to change. For example, it has been pointed out that we tend to converge until societies reach a tipping point, and from this point we start to diverge according to our local culture's norms and values. Most poorer countries will be similar in preferring low-priced, high-quality products to high-priced, and added-value brands. However, when they become richer and more educated, consumers start to pick products that fit more to their own cultural preferences and tradition¹³. When people possess more or less enough of everything, they will spend their discretionary income on what most fits their value patterns. Americans will buy more cars and the Dutch will travel abroad even more. Even when people seem to buy the same product, they are more likely to purchase for different reasons. McDonald's for example, has different status and meanings in different countries. This fast food chain restaurant is a place for a quick eat but in some cultures can be seen as a location for a more formal outing, dating, or a social hang-out for young people who constantly need the internet. While Facebook is more of a private friend-and-family zone in some cultures, it is downright fully interwoven with business operations in others. Globalization in many ways is merely the frequency of similar outward expression in our Tree model across the whole world. The collective values people hold dear, the motivation behind those seemingly global objects, symbols and actions continue to differ and stay put. This fits our first possibility mentioned above when we see a non-typical element of a culture: values stay intact while the outward expression changes and looks similar all over the globe. Business people who think customers are a globally homogenized mass of consumers are simply the birds that fly over the forest, seeing many trees that

have similar patterns of leaves and canopies, and think to themselves: “Yes! I have seen the trees. They are all the same!”

The second reason for the revival of local cultures despite globalization has to do with the conscious appreciation of our own culture only when there is a contrast or external threat. When we are safely inside our own culture, we tend to take it for granted, like the air we breathe in. But imagine when you are in the water. The moment we step into the water is the moment we realize what our own culture means to us, what our air means to us. Similarly, a fish would not understand the meaning of water until the fish is put on the ground. The differences of our culture and the new cultures are obvious, undeniable, and striking. As a result of this clash, most of us experience *cultural shock*, a phenomenon we will discuss more later in the book. In the longer term, when we have stepped out of our cultural comfort zone and overcome cultural shock, the clash of contrast or external threats put things in perspective. We start to realize who we actually are, what norms and values we actually have, and as a result, may come to appreciate and embrace our “newly found” identities and heritage.

At the collective level of the Pyramid, most cultures tend to react conservatively to this clash of contrast. Since norms and values are difficult and slow to change, outside differences can be seen as threats to the stability and order of society. We have witnessed many communities with the tendency to shield and protect their traditions by distancing themselves from modernity such as some conservative religious organizations and communities. This is also the reason why co-cultures can be very persistent and powerful. The diversity in the US for example reveals its vibrant African-American, Asian-American, Native American and Hispanic cultures while local communities such as Chinatown, Korean town or Little Saigon are strongholds of social and cultural values in the midst of the dominant white culture. These are also topics we will discuss along the concepts of *multiculturalism* and *cultural relativism*.

Thus, international business is not going to be homogenized in a global village. In fact, we cannot talk about global business without making it *glocal* business. As Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi said: “Anyone who wants to go global has to understand the local. People live in the local. I’ve never met a global consumer. I never expect to. We define ourselves by our differences. It’s called identity”¹⁴.

Think global- Plan local- Act individual

While the collective level of the Inverted Pyramid tends to resist change, at the individual level of the Pyramid, things are much more flexible and unpredictable. A person’s cultural profile is open to a myriad of responses to social processes. While deeply rooted under the influence of human universality and imprinted culture during childhood, an individual engages in social interaction with an incredible complexity. This complexity can make others who communicate with them become anxious since there is so much unknown. And that is when we tend to employ a very natural mechanism called *stereotype*.

Stereotyping is simply a reaction of our brain to fill in the blanks and to try creating a big picture with the lack of information. In our Inverted Pyramid model, it equates to an erroneous attempt at understanding the individual level by using the collective level instead. By utilizing a wrong level of analysis, we falsely assume everyone in a particular cultural group is the same (he behaves like that because he is a male/ or “English”, “black”, “old”, “immigrant”, “banker”...etc), or we falsely

assume some particular action represents the whole group (some terrorists are Muslim so Muslim are terrorists). Of course this is wrong, but most of us are prone to do it anyway because of our fear in everything we cannot control and understand. The fact that we can give this unknown element a collective name makes it less threatening and manageable. We will discuss more about stereotyping later in this book.

We will also delve deeper into different mechanisms and processes such as *DMIS* and *cultural intelligence* to overcome the need to stereotype, to deal with cultural shock in the long term. We will aim at cultivating a capacity for recognizing common goals, concerns and backgrounds (universal), preparing for diversity (collective), and responding to the unknown (individual). Competent business people will skillfully develop themselves through the process of cultural sensitivity and interact mindfully with the social context in which they operate. They will start off from a crucial foundation of *universality* which connects humanity together, seeking similarities, recognizing fundamental like-mindedness, marking a willingness to cooperate the starting point of any business endeavors. From this solid platform, they move on to plan for the unavoidable diversity in various local *collective* cultures that they will encounter. They are armed with knowledge about general trademarks of German culture, Arab culture, teenage culture, hip-hop culture, LGBT culture...etc. They may prepare their marketing campaigns, sale strategies, social responsibility programs according to this repertoire of knowledge about local collectivities. However, the moment they reach out to any *individual* interaction such as greeting a colleague, discussing with the team, convincing a customer, emailing a partner...etc, they are ready to strip off much of the collective navigation. Because they know each individual is very different, capable of carrying along both typical and non-typical cultural traits of the community he/she comes from.

I have termed this process of cultural competence as “Think global – Plan local – Act individual”, which corresponds with the three layers of our Inverted Pyramid model. It may sound easy, but it is not. The fact that up to 40% of expatriates return home before the completion of their foreign assignments, mainly due to their failure to adjust to the host culture, shows that working in international business can be challenging¹⁵. And it is costly too, as for each failed assignment, the damage for multinational enterprises is between \$40, 000 and \$1million.

None of us want to be one of those 40% who return home before the deal is sealed. Nor do we want to be the reason for costing our company so many resources because a working term is cut short. Our goal is to be successful in the new age of management which is no longer the management of work but the management of people. And if people are products of their cultures, then culture is what we will need to know.

Summary

- It is mostly our culture, not our genes, which supplies the majority of solutions and guidance we use to survive and prosper in the society of our birth.
- Culture creates two contrasting tendencies: (1) the diversity that divides people into sub-groups in order to recognize who is trustworthy, and to protect group’s knowledge; and (2) the tendency to seek cooperation beyond groups in order to manage resources more effectively.
- The driving forces of cross-cultural communication are: (1) Resource management; (2) Speed of technology and information development; (3) Rapid changes in global demography; and (4) The emergence of a global economy.

- The Tree model of cultural elements has three layers with different tendencies to change. While the list of our life fundamental concerns for existence is pretty stable, our guiding values to deal with those concerns are very slow and difficult to change. What changes quickly are our outward expressions of existence: objects, symbols, and actions.
- The Inverted Pyramid model of culture analysis has three layers that can be incorporated with the Tree model. While we all share certain sets of universal and fundamental concerns/ values/ outward expression for our existence, at the collective level, each society places different levels of importance on these concerns, values and outward expressions. Each individual, while deeply under the influence of universal and collective elements, has a specific cultural profile. People are not different in kind, just different in level.
- For every non-typical element that contradicts the dominant norm, there are always two possibilities: (1) This is the non-typical outward expression of the same guiding value; (2) This is the non-typical outward expression of a non-typical value that differs from the dominant moral position. What we see can be either “what it is”, or “what it is not”.
- Globalization is more likely the homogenization of only the top layer in the Tree model (object, symbols, actions) while groups of people worldwide still tend to hold to their collective guiding values. We define ourselves by our differences. Think global – Plan local – Act individual.

Activities and Discussion ideas

1. In 5 minutes, list all things that are related to a specific culture of your choice.
 - Draw a Tree model and position all elements on your list into the correct layer of the Tree model.
 - Discuss with your group how we observe a culture, how different layers of a culture change across time, and how easy that is to mistake a culture with only its outward expressions.
2. As a group, take a nation that you all agree to work on, preferably a nation you are all involved in some way.
 - Work first on your own by specifying the dominant culture as well as other co-cultures.
 - Compare this list with other group members. Discuss how your co-cultures overlap or differ from each other. Use the Tree model to discuss the various ways in which the dominant culture influences and controls the fundamental concerns, values, and outward expressions of other co-cultures.
3. Use the Inverted Pyramid model to share one example of a fundamental concern or value we all share at the universal level but where each community attaches a different level of importance at the collective level.
4. Analyze this case according to the Inverted Pyramid model. You are encouraged to use the internet for more information: “Simon was born and raised in Egypt. He comes from a Shia family – a Muslim sect which counts for around 8% of the Egyptian population. He is sent to a 6-month business assignment in Canada, and very quickly fits into the Canadian culture. He feels at home, often drinks wine with his host family. He openly admires the way Canadian people adhere to freedom of speech, and he wishes that Egyptians would be more politically liberated to speak their mind. At the weekend, he regularly cooks for friends and his host family, proudly showing that hospitality is a wonderful aspect of the Egyptian culture.
 - In the Inverted Pyramid model, specify all the available elements to the correct levels of analysis: (1) Simon’s individual outward expressions, values, and fundamental concerns; and (2) dominant and co-cultures’ values.
 - In what way Simon is a typical and in what way a non-typical case of his culture? Do the non-typical elements indicate he has different values compared to his collective culture?
 - Try to figure out the fundamental concerns and values at the Universal level of the Inverted Pyramid model. To what extent do Simon and all of us care about the same issues and have the same values? Suppose Simon and someone have a tense disagreement on the issues of “freedom of speech” and “hospitality”, what can you say to bring them closer to each other and bridge their differences?

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