

## Cultural diversity and how to survive it

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*The article first explores the ingredients of a working definition of culture (beliefs, values, norms, attitudes, intentions, rules, schemata), then attempts to map out the relationship among key-concepts like Culture-Distance (Furnham, Bochner, 1982), the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy (Williams, 2007), and culture's buffer-function (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997). Cultural Diversity is examined from the points of view of Universalism/Relativism (Salzman, 2006), Prescriptivism/Descriptivism (Williams, 2006), and that of Traditional/Indigenous psychologies (Allwood, 2006). Working analogies with some of Noam Chomsky's (1957, 1986) linguistic concepts (competence/performance, deep/surface structures, linguistic universals) are discussed. Finally, a need for a multi-cultural buffer is confirmed, and the potentiality for the existence of enough common ground for such is tentatively concluded.*

**Key words:** culture-distance, beliefs, values, norms, rules, cultural relativism

If we believe that “culture is construed continuously” (Said, 2005), we would certainly agree that “cultural diversity is not a problem: it is a resource” (Berry, 2006). However, intercultural communication can be difficult: in a cross-cultural context assumptions we tend to take for granted are often not valid. The difficulties can stem either from simply not knowing how the other culture works – or, for some reason, refusing to utilize what we know. Both scenarios are the more likely the more dissimilar the cultures in question happen to be.

Cultural similarities foster a feeling of familiarity – cultural differences alienate, as measured by the well-known index of culture-distance (providing empirical confirmation to the hypothesis that cultures’

relative location on this dimension is a major determinant of the extent to which culture-shock is experienced, as well as that of the ease with which the respective cultures can be learned through contact (Furnham, Bochner, 1982). In other words, cultural diversity does not tend to go unnoticed. So what exactly “makes up” culture?

Let us propose a working definition, strictly for the purposes of further argument, that goes: “Culture is an ongoing process of construing reality in a shared, systematic way, in constant interaction with a set of behaviours” (Williams, 2006). Or, to put it rather more succinctly, “culture is normatizing behaviour” (Bond, 2007). According to this, our social behaviour would be most influenced by so-

called social norms, usually put forward in the form of rules of some sort. Rules have been shown to come in different categories (Williams, 2007): those that generate (constitutive rules) and those that merely modify (regulative rules). Both can be either descriptive (stating what is observed) or prescriptive (promoting one alternative over another). Norms and rules tend to be the product of beliefs and values shared by the culture or society in question. Beliefs are most important and axiomatic ways of construing the self and the world, shaped by so-called schemata, i.e. models based on past experience about how to interpret reality and plan behaviour. Behaviours are established ways to respond to stimuli, i.e. people as well as situations. Values are the beliefs we hold about what is desirable. It is easy to see how schemata will vary enormously both among individuals and among cultures, – and how that will lead to various beliefs, values, norms, rules, and result in a wide variety of behaviours. In order for behaviours to manifest themselves, a process known as intention formation is necessary, partly determined by attitudes, i.e. the mental disposition to act. Attitudes themselves can be of two types: prescriptive and descriptive. Prescriptive attitudes tend to be value-laden, based upon beliefs, lending themselves to norms and prescriptive rules, and are often rather subjective, – at least compared to descriptive attitudes that base themselves more on operational observations, and the objectively experienced workings of descriptive rules. Although it is often on attitudes that individuals' decisions whether a rule is constitutive or regulative depend, the deci-

sion tends to be disguised as “objective”: what is deemed to be a constitutive rule is put forward as a norm. Thus it would appear that there are not two but three ways of influencing behaviour: 1. attitude, 2. norm, and 3. attitude disguised as norm. Indeed, it seems to be the case that “people apply the same principles to beliefs as to objective reality” (Pepitone, 2007). This fits in with the hypothesis concerning the bias about over-estimating the incidence of Constitutive Rules while under-estimating the proportion of Regulative Rules, called the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy (Williams, 2007). This bias is, in effect, two fallacies rolled into one:

- firstly, the assumption that all rules deemed important by the individual or culture are equally and enormously important (i.e. all rules are “constitutive”), and,
- secondly, that any violation of these rules threatens the culture with disintegration (i.e. all rules have to be “prescriptive”).

Once again, it is easy to see how the automatic assumption that “a rule, is a rule so it must not be violated” inevitably leads to other-culture intolerance.

But does this mean that “it is all OK as long as it is ‘cultural’” ?!

Thinking of the notorious virgin killings, or, indeed, any kind of human rights violation, makes one cautious if not sceptical. This brings us to the question of Cultural Relativism, Multi-culturalism and the Universalist position (Salzman, 2006). Cultural relativism, on the plus side, certainly allows for variance between cultures. However, it also allows for NOT

passing value-judgements of ANY sort on other cultures: at which point Hitler and President Bush come to mind. Multi-culturalism, therefore, might be an honourable ideology (based on cultural relativism), but it would appear that it had better be used rather advisedly. The core of the matter appears to have to do with CONTEXT. While Relativism is “high context” (the attitude being “each to its own”), Universalism is “low context” (concentrating on the generic). The principle is even more stringently demonstrated by the difference between so-called Traditional versus Indigenous Psychologies. Traditional psychologies operate in a “top-down” fashion: starting with psychological universals (i.e. the features that unite humankind) arriving at cultural differences, keeping context low. Indigenous psychologies, on the other hand, are “bottom-up”: they concentrate on respective cultural contexts (high context) that produce cultural differences. The basic assumption, therefore, would be “similarity” between cultures with Traditional psychologies, while “difference” between cultures with Indigenous psychologies – thus rendering cultural differences more of a nuisance with the one, while similarities more of a bonus with the other.

All this might make other-culture tolerance easier with the Indigenous stance while more difficult with the Traditional one – even if descriptivism/prescriptivism remains firmly under control. It is at this point that the educated thinker cannot but find a helpful working analogy with linguistics: Saussure’s “langue” and “parole” (i.e. a person’s knowledge of the rules of a language versus the actual use

of that language in real situations (Saussure, 1916), leading to Chomsky’s “competence” and “performance”. Linguistics, he argued, should be concerned with the study of competence, and not restrict itself to performance. (So far so good about “competence” going with “Traditional psychologies”, while “performance” with “Indigenous psychologies”.) However, in his Generative Grammar, Chomsky distinguished between two levels of organization of sentences, known as “deep structure” (the underlying abstract part) and “surface structure” (the concrete representation we actually hear uttered). If we find analogy between deep structures and psychological universals, as well as between surface structures and cultural differences, it might be even more helpful to note with Chomsky that different surface structures can have the same deep structure (“Cats chase mice” and “Mice are chased by cats” have different surface structures but the same deep structure), where only the context decides which surface structure will end up being uttered. This leads us back to the utmost importance of context and decontextualisation we have already touched upon in connection with cultural relativism. It would appear that one cannot decontextualise without enlarging the margin for error – any more than one can safeguard against errors by paying too much lip-service to context. Thus errors of judgement seem to be inevitable – we can, however, decide on which side to make errors. Individual cultures are tremendously important: as suggested by the Terror Management Theory (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997), one of the main function of culture is to

buffer against mortality-awareness. With the globalization of our day, individual cultural buffers are rapidly losing power. Attempts to re-instate this power (as seen with the increase of nationalism and fundamentalism, for instance), however, are increasingly proving to be aborted. Clearly, there is an urgent need for a multi-cultural

buffer. Increased other-culture tolerance through Culture Learning and Intercultural Dialogue, as well as mindfulness of the processes delineated earlier, might be our best chance to find enough of a common ground to build on, the ultimate aim being to develop a pan-cultural model of human social behaviour.

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## KULTŪRŲ SKIRTUMAI IR KAIP TAI IŠGYVENTI

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#### S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje atskleidžiama kultūros sąvoka, aptariami esminiai apibrėžimai (tikėjimas, vertybės, normos, požiūriai, siekiniai, taisyklės), taip pat nusakomos susijusios sąvokos, tokios kaip kultūrų atsirbojimai (Furnham & Bochner 1982), taisyklių – klaidingų interpretacijų kategorijos *Fallacy* (Williams, 2007), kultūros slopinamos funkcijos (e.g. Greenberg et al 1997), jų tarpusavio ryšiai.

Kultūrų skirtumai analizuojami taikant universalumo / reliatyvumo (Salzman, 2006), preskriptyvu-

mo / deskriptyvumo (Williams, 2006) ir tradicinės / vietos psichologijos (Allwood, 2006) požiūrius.

Pranešime taip pat pateikiamos tam tikros analogijos su Noam Chomsky (1957, 1986) pateikiamais lingvistiniais konceptais (kompetencija / spektaklis, giluminės / paviršiaus struktūros, lingvistinės bendrybės).

Pabaigoje, vartojant kultūrą kaip daugiakultūrę slopinimo sampratą, teigiama, kad egzistuoja bendras kultūros (-ų) pagrindas.