Paradoxical interpretations of Value Dimensions by students: how to avoid the "etic" trap

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Abstract

The most commonly used etic tool is the value dimension, in which comparisons or even measurements are attempted using concepts selected by the researcher such as individualism / collectivism (e.g. Hofstede 2001) or close / distant proxemics (e.g. Hall 1976). However, interpretations of culture involve us in more complexity than is suggested by such rankings and numbers. Students have long struggled with paradoxical interpretations of dimensions and often reached conclusions of doubtful validity. There is a great temptation to simplify and use these rankings as a proxy for culture. Endless student papers have used rankings on Hofstede's dimensions as if they summed up the meaning of cultures, not to mention more ambitious research papers.

In reality in business and social life we deal with cultural influences on multiple levels while situational factors make every encounter unique. To make the complexity of interpretation greater we run the risk of attributing explanations inappropriately to value dimensions or to one dimension when more than one are involved, or confusing a cultural dimension with a non-cultural situational variable, thus creating paradoxical and apparently perverse results.

In this paper I discuss a selection of examples of paradoxes and confusions encountered by my business school students. My students completed an exercise including a number of these paradoxes showing that interpretation of behaviour can be misleading and confusing: not one of them got all the answers right - insofar as such interpretations can be said to be right or wrong.

I de-brief these using the extensive texts in Hofstede's "Culture's Consequences" 2nd ed, often over-looked as students go straight to the rankings pages (or worse a summary web page!), Osland et al's model of cultural paradoxes and sophisticated stereotyping, (Academy of Management Executive 2000), John Berry's work on derived etics (Berry 1980), Smith & Bond on cross-cultural psychology and Spencer-Oatey & Franklin on Intercultural Interaction among others. Alexander Thomas' "Kulturstandard", deriving dimensions from bi-lateral situational learning is also helpful. The aim is to help students avoid such confusion in future interpretations of cultures.

Introduction

When striving to understand cultures for the purpose of doing better business, improving diplomatic relations or teaching cross-cultural awareness in business schools, we make use of basic tools, the most commonly used of which is the "etic" value dimension, in which comparisons or even measurements are attempted using variables based on concepts selected by the researcher such as individualism / collectivism (e.g. Hofstede 2001) or close / distant proxemics (e.g. Hall 1976). Etic is to be understood as observer statements and comparisons using criteria selected by the researcher.

The etic dimensions approach to dealing with cultures implies that people's behaviour is explicable in terms of culture level categorization and rankings. The legitimacy of this approach has been questioned on the grounds of imposition of dimensions by the researcher, the danger of non-representative samples in deriving the dimensions and within nation diversity among other objections (Holden 2002, McSweeney 2002). Clearly neither the values nor the behaviour of an individual can be predicted with confidence from their membership of a given culture. Methodologically this is a problem of the incompatibility between macro constructs and micro observations: no conclusions can be drawn about the similarity or diversity between individuals from culture level observations. Breaches of this principle are what Hofstede refers to as the ecological fallacy (Hofstede, 2001).

In an extreme interpretation, the complexity of inputs is so great that it becomes meaningless to talk in terms of culture level categories shared by members of a society. (McSweeney 2002; Smith 2002). In any case one should always be aware that behaviour cannot be predicted from values though they contribute to the explanation in an unknown degree (Rokeach et al, 1984)

By defining culture as the set of forces which influences members of communities through their collective experience we are creating a construct which may lead us into the trap of "culture as essence" (Holden 2002). The use of rankings also leads easily to conceptual confusion between culture as statistical distribution and culture as social force: on the one hand a statistical measurement and on the other its meaning, or at least an interpretation of its meaning. If these dangers are a necessary price we pay in the quest for comparative methodology in studying cultures we must do our utmost to minimize the risks.

A major conceptual problem as well as practical danger is the tendency for students and researchers to form a simplistic image of a national culture based on a handful of rankings on dimensions which then serves as a "proxy" representing culture as an independent variable that subsequently is used to "explain" cultural influences on a phenomenon of interest to the researcher. In reality interpretation of phenomena using value dimensions is far from straightforward and can produce apparently perverse results; I refer to these as paradoxes since they seem to produce contradictions or incoherence in our observations (not in the pure sense of a statement that cannot be resolved logically).

In an excellent article entitled "Beyond sophisticated stereotyping: cultural sense-making in context" Osland et al (2000) observe that the subject of cultural paradoxes has been largely ignored in the literature and examine possible reasons why this might be the case. They see it as a result of over-simplified stereotyping, which they call "sophisticated" because a scientific approach through dimensions is attempted. Over-simplification occurs in the face of multiple cultural factors and Western dichotomous "black or white" thinking. Osland et al propose the idea of value trumping: certain values take precedence over others in particular contexts to explain the paradoxes. Whilst I fully support these explanations I suggest there is another source of confusion in interpretation that "explains" these paradoxical observations: they arise because observations mistakenly thought to reflect contrasts on the same value dimension may often involve two different ones or the comparison of incomparable situations.

The authors offer three scenarios that illustrate this type of confusion: individualistic Americans volunteering massively for community projects, relationship-oriented Costa Ricans' indifference to customers and Japanese contracts that leave many details unspecified in spite of Japan's high ranking on uncertainty avoidance. In terms of value trumping American historical and religious imperatives trump individualism, power distance trumps relationship orientation in the case of Costa Rican bank tellers and collectivism trumps uncertainty avoidance in the case of Japanese contracts.

I suggest that these scenarios can best be understood in a slightly different way. In the first scenario individualism is not inimical to the propensity to volunteer; the choice of whether to give to charity or not is an individual's choice and unrelated to any collectivistic pressure; collectivism refers to involuntary obligations into which one is socialized in childhood, not freely chosen ones later in life. In the bank teller scenario, service to non-family customers has nothing to do with collectivistic relationship business and does not involve "warm interpersonal relationships" since staff are dealing with out-group not in-group members (the authors mention this in their article). In the third case, lack of detail in contracts is a function of high context cultural communication norms and completely consistent with high uncertainty avoidance.

The fact that other variables are present does not mean questioning the value dimensions of individualism, relationship orientation or high uncertainty avoidance respectively but these values alone are not enough to explain the actual behaviour without taking contextual factors into account. The mistake is to diagnose the intrusion of another dimension, giving paradoxical results. If anything the situations confirm the presence of the cultural dimensions rather than trumping them. My view of value trumping is that it occurs in situations in which agents can choose from repertoires available to them, as is the case people with multicultural profiles and a range of cultural resources acquired during infancy, for example from school, family, club, peer groups.

In this paper I note examples of paradoxes collected while working with students over the years and for whom they have proved to be a rich source of confusion. My objective is to raise awareness of these potential confusions with a view to facilitating the process of cultural sense-making - as did Osland et al in their paper, but using a somewhat different approach from those authors. After presenting the examples I discuss clarification and how to deal with this problem.

The paradoxes discussed with students

Paradox 1. "Mediterranean drivers are very individualistic: they don't care enough about other drivers to bother to signal their intentions

Mediterranean drivers seem to be very individualistic in the way they drive: they never care enough about other drivers to bother to signal their intentions and often are so distracted they slow down and have to be reminded to move off! People from more collectivistic cultures, on acquiring the appurtenances of individualism, behave for some time as if they were in a traditional group-centred community. The automobile is an individualistic means of transport par excellence, but somewhat less obviously it

requires individualistic behaviour in driving it. This means learning a code to be used by all and implies a code of politeness - including indicating one's intentions.

Not observing such rules is not an indication of individualism but a failure to understand individual responsibility for using public infrastructure. Similar arguments apply to mobile phones, which start out as status symbols in collectivistic societies and only become functional and status free over a long time if at all, hence the initial tendency to ostentatious behaviour and apparently anti-social behaviour such as loud talking. The Japanese, the Chinese and to a lesser extent the Spanish have absorbed the mobile as an instrument of collectivistic sharing sending hundreds of messages to each other each day. In contrast Scandinavian countries and Finland are hypothesized to have high penetration of mobiles for completely different reasons of practicality and efficiency.

Paradox 2: My Spanish friend don't open doors for me, interrupt when I'm talking push in front and talk too loud. This is because they are just rude!

Northern Europeans see Latins as rude when they slam doors in strangers' faces, interrupt when people are talking, push in front when waiting their turn, talk too loud, speak on mobiles ostentatiously, don't pick up litter, throw cigarette ends everywhere and have loud side conversations in classes and meetings. But are they? These perceptions are largely the reflection of different social norms.

Politeness systems such as the Anglo, Germanic or Scandinavian are based on horizontal distances between people and universalistic sets of communication rules perceived as impersonal to outsiders but designed to protect people from too much contact with others and inter-personal conflict potential by treating them with formal correctness.

Collectivistic traditions mean the habit of living together in the community: it is not necessary nor is it expected for people to continually acknowledge the presence of others, - who are always there, whether we like it or not. Indeed to be polite can be interpreted as coldness and displeasure: we take it for granted we can borrow things from our friends without asking for example. (Wang et al 2000). People in our informal in-group do not require social etiquette and diplomacy; outsiders meanwhile may be altogether ignored, as in Osland et al's Costa Rica example. Only when outsiders are accepted as honorary members of a group – typically, valued foreigners visiting a country on business such as gaijin in Japan - will we be consciously (to some exaggeratedly) "polite" or "nice" and foster respect through hospitality and gifts.

Paradox 3: Team work. Teams are the most individualistic form of work organization. It takes a highly individualistic mentality on the part of team members to attribute functions and tasks among themselves and to respect the personal responsibility each bears. One consequence is limited tolerance of failure on the part of team members to pull their weight. (Katzenbach & Smith, 1994) Each member, regardless of who they are, must follow the rules: they are individually responsible. In collectivistic societies on the other hand there is high support for others and tolerance of failure to perform or social loafing behaviour providing they are from the same in-group; duties of solidarity are more important than those of task completion. The cup of understanding is not

bottomless, however: shame can be a powerful social disciplinary weapon, but it is social shame rather than individualistic sense of duty or guilt that is the mechanism.

Japanese teamwork thrives in a rather different way: also highly goal oriented with a strong sense of group consensus and negotiated objectives and arising from this a clear sense of duty.

Paradox 4: Service.

As we saw in the Osland et al scenario, for Costa Rican bank clerks service and relationships do not go hand in hand. Though we might expect customer service would be better in collectivistic cultures this is far from being the case: what the average Anglo customer would consider good service is strongest in competitive goal oriented cultures where low value is placed on relationships. Customer service is an impersonal thing: it is business sense not human warmth that drives it, the opposite of inter-personal relationships in fact.

What is more, the notion of service suggests social inequality; for this reason many European countries minimize the symbolic manifestation by building tip-giving into the bill. In the more competitive American culture tipping is not seen as demeaning: one is rewarded or penalized according to performance - leaving less than 10% to 15% means disapproval. This is intended to make staff competitive in offering service: a retrograde view for the social liberal Europeans!

Paradox 5: Japanese vagueness in contracts, a trust-building and face issue as noted above. The high-context communication style implies the importance of relationships and trust and is an alternative to detailed formal contractual clauses as a way of guaranteeing delivery and quality in business arrangements: internalization through trusting relationships is considered to be more reliable than threats of litigation through detailed paperwork. This difference of view has led to many misunderstandings in international negotiations.

Paradox 6: "Spanish bull-fighters and motorbike riders take huge risks so they have low uncertainty avoidance".

Why do high UA cultures encourage dangerous behaviours such as smoking, reckless driving, bullfighting and spectacular performance sports such as motor bike racing? High UA implies a tendency to seek clear mental structures to reduce ambiguity and consequent anxiety through unswerving faith in experts, teachers, priests and similar truth-determining figures, pervasive rules and regulations, absolute truths and strong belief in ritual - at the limit superstitions. To reduce ambiguity some cultures focus on numbers and codified reporting whilst others rely on traditional social relationships, networks, tradition or superstition, conserving the status of hierarchies and institutions as bulwarks against the uncertain. Within these frameworks they run calculated and familiar risks.

Fishermen, motorbike racers and bull fighters are likely to be high on intolerance of ambiguity but play with death in their professional lives. Aversion to known risk is not the same as aversion to uncertainty; risk can be calculated and is understandable.

Paradox 7: The Chinese don't like to say a direct "no" in negotiations because they are high context and expect you to understand what they are feeling.

This item was included as a decoy in the sense that the statement is essentially likely to be a fair interpretation of the behaviour of Chinese business people dealing with social equals in formal situations

Paradox 8: Everyone breaks the rules when they can get away with ti so what's the difference? This is a universal phenomenon.

It is argued that people break rules in ambiguity avoiding cultures because of a picaresque sense of disrespect for the authorities, who are there to be cheated because their interests are not identified with those of the people. If rules are broken in low UA countries it is likely to be because of high levels on other dimensions: goal orientation, individualism and pragmatism in achieving one's goals. Rule breaking behaviours, like many others, may have different explanations in different cultural settings and respond to different value dimensions. Furthermore, as often noted, there are likely to be far more regulations to be observed or broken in the high UA culture (Hofstede 2001). It may be helpful to think of UA as intolerance of ambiguity.

Paradox 9: You see more flags in US than anywhere in the world and the biggest sums given to charity so in fact they're pretty collectivistic.

The patriotism of US citizens, the strong identification with sports teams, the spectacle of cheerleaders and high membership of groups and clubs of various kinds has often been noted. Visitors may come to the conclusion that the American sense of team affiliation is so strong that they are in the presence of a highly collectivistic culture. The key is that the group membership Americans take so seriously is a voluntary one: they were not born into their baseball, football or basketball team. The test of individualism is the ease with which one can separate one's ambitions and loyalties from those of the family or tribe into which one was born. In contrast the collectivistic principle of deep-felt loyalty and reciprocal obligations to family reflects an entirely involuntary membership (Triandis, 1994).

Paradox 10: wealthy European countries are more concerned about sustainability and welfare: they are becoming more feminine. Second decoy: this is not an unreasonable statement about values shifting towards somewhat more nurturing and environmentally aware orientation.

Paradox 11. Freedom: "these people are free and relaxed to they must belong to a low uncertainty avoidance culture.

"I feel so free here!" exclaimed a visitor. "I come to this warm noisy culture and find that people drink, smoke, run around all night, make noise, drive like maniacs on mountain roads and generally give the impression that life is fun and there are no holds barred. Then I am told there are more regulations here and that the authorities control people, you are obliged to carry identity and car insurance papers". Seeming contradiction but there is no contradiction: only a paradox. In cultures with histories of strong central government, weak democratic institutions and strong church this is likely to be the case. The moral constraint on behaviour that may accompany this, for example in Franco's puritanical and repressive Spain underscores the paradox.

These are cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (UA): dress is likely to be more formal, status symbolism stronger, teachers and professional opinion less open to questioning or interpretation, the church to have a stronger priesthood. The onus is on the individual to claim rights from authority and not the reverse: if there is no indication to the contrary you may assume you are not allowed to enter an office, walk on the grass, waive a subject at school, eat in the classroom and so on, reflecting the relationship between authority and the individual (e.g. Hofstede 2001).

Paradox 12. Macho cultures are high on masculinity

The history of unleaded gas is paradoxical: the cities that first contaminated, from London UK to Cleveland Ohio, are now the loudest in condemnation of contamination, at least publicly; federal US refusal to sign the Kyoto agreements is compensated for by activism at individual state level. To poorer countries it seems that with wealth it is easy to have such high principles; they are sceptical about demonstrations of concern for sustainable growth - as indeed for the health of feckless smokers and their passive victims. Some years ago in Spain the Citröen Volcane used leaded fuel, while other comparable but less "sporty" cars of the same make used un-leaded. Macho driving above cars' natural cruising speed and competitive acceleration is more environmentally unfriendly than having big cars and driving them sedately. Macho behaviour is at the expense of the environment and by extension the welfare of the public, and insofar as this is indeed evidence of high masculinity.

However, cultures where there is a high incidence of ostentatiously male behaviour such as in the Mediterranean region which are "macho" with traditional gender-emphasizing dress styles are likely to be less aggressively competitive in business behaviour as more task-oriented cultures where gender distinctions are far less marked: gender role distinctiveness has little to do with competitiveness and masculine or goal seeking behaviours in business. The two tend to coincide in the case of the Japanese who are highly specific in gender roles and highly competitive in international business. However, the Arabs are highly gender distinctive and not markedly aggressive in business terms. The Scandinavians and Dutch are low in gender distinctions and socially nurturing with institutionalized social support systems and institutional policies as opposed to "sink or swim" indifference to the weak and dependent. Thus it is useful to distinguish two distinct dimensions: gender specificity and goal orientation. I have not heard a satisfactory resolution of this paradox even from the writer himself, who

still claims that his masculinity dimension reflects predominant gender roles. (personal communication SIETAR conference Sofia 2005)

Paradox 13. Scandinavians look after the poor so they're a collectivistic culture.

A common confusion is to suppose that a culture that looks after the, old and dependent institutionally is collectivistic. This is a confusion with femininity: the one hand collectivistic relationship oriented cultures look after their own people; on the other hand femininity means concern for people we do not know or value as part of our group: the classic image of femininity is the story of the Good Samaritan.

Paradox 14. Eastern Asians are not harmony seeking because they shout at their employees

High context business cultures seek harmony, avoid confrontation and preserve face of the participants. It is important not to state disagreement or displeasure too strongly because it threatens face by creating a risk of disturbing social harmony: showing a peer to be wrong, making them angry (and thus lacking self-control) or ridiculous. These face threatening situations reflect as much on the face of the instigator as on the person affected. Business card rituals, elaborate hospitality rules and exchanges of appropriate levels of gifts are all designed to maintain harmonious correctness and open doors to the gradual development of implicit understandings.

In contrast, in situations involving class and status differences, behaviour is based on inequality not respect between equals. The acceptance of hierarchical differences in high PDI cultures leads to behaviour that would be perceived as disrespectful or offensive to the Westerner. Parents shout at children, employers publicly and mercilessly reprimand employees, and orders are given to waiters, barmen or taxi drivers in peremptory and brusque fashion. The issue here is power distance, not present in peer to peer meetings. Directness and indirectness co-exist in the same culture and behaviour is explained by different values in different situations.

Why are the Latins and the Chinese so direct in dealing with people when ordering in restaurants or bars and so indirect in doing business compared with North Americans and northern Europeans? Behaviour in formal peer situations such as those in professional and business life is significantly different from informal situations in social and family life.

Paradox 15. Prohibitions: you can smoke but you can't eat in here

In many cultures you're not allowed to eat in public places but you are allowed to smoke: infractions of the eating rule are enforced more strongly than those against smoking; in others the reverse is the case. The assumption in individualistic societies is that behaviour is permitted until the opposite is demonstrated; this includes eating in public places. For generations it included smoking too but as authorities become sensitive to issues of health and environmental protection, individuals, otherwise sacrosanct, are expected to look after their health and that of others. Freedom is a high

value but the authorities will intervene to protect people against themselves. The implication of course is that these authorities know what is good for people!

Hofstede pointed out the correlation between high uncertainty avoidance and the requirement for citizens to carry identification, reflecting the individual's duty to the state (Hofstede, 2001). But in recent decades there have been other reasons for demanding compulsory identification. In the U.S. the practice has developed with the need for protection, tracing crime and drug offenders and measures against terrorism. Once again similar phenomena can have different cultural explanations and the paradox melts away.

Paradox 16: Aggressiveness. The Japanese exercise extreme self restraint and social control but simultaneously are markedly aggressive in business with the outside world and historically have been famed for military aggression. The paradox derives from the in/out-group distinction; self restraint and elaborate systems to maintain respect and face apply to members of the group but not outsiders, which means non-Japanese not elevated to the status of gaijin and, in business, women, who are not expected for example to participate in after-work drinking and bonding sessions. The harmony and social control are channelled into intensely goal seeking behaviour: social control strengthens loyalty to the country and corporate cultures. Japanese culture is collectivistic and masculine: they care for those they know, not for those they don't. The stiff upper lip and military harshness of the British empire through its public schools has always had characteristics of the same paradoxical juxtaposition of social constraint and violence.

Paradox 17: Materialism.

Materialism is not the prerogative of the aggressive individualistic cultures. The emergence from poverty and consumption-denying social norms whether in China or the satellites of the Soviet empire soon led to marked interest in material welfare. Collectivism is not equated with self denial or asceticism but life long obligation. Chinese students share their new found wealth with their families but are not for this reason any less acquisitive; status through material wealth is valued and indeed often paraded in more collectivistic societies. The difference is in the way it is expected to be distributed.

Student activity de-briefing.

The first 10 paradoxes were included in a class activity based on a questionnaire to which students answered individually in the earlier part of a cross-cultural management course as a prelude to class discussion. The remaining paradoxes (from 11 to 17) appeared in an article I published on the subject in 2006 (Bell, 2006).

Summary of student responses on the 10 questions:

	False	True
1. Mediterranean drivers are very individualistic: they don't care enough about other drivers to bother to signal their intentions.	20	19
2. My Spanish friends don't open doors for me, interrupt when I'm talking, push in front and talk too loud, this is because they are just rude!	36	1
3. Teams work best when we share goals in a collectivistic spirit so individualists are not good team members.	25	14
4. Since the Japanese are supposed to have high UAI one would expect detailed contract to cover all eventualities	17	21
5. Latin American bank clerks are often rather cold dealing with customers and are more interested in the work than people	33	3
6. Spanish bull-fighters and motor bike racers take huge risks so they have low uncertainty avoidance	20	19
7. The Chinese don't like to say a direct "no" in negotiations because they are high context and expect you to understand what they are feeling	12	27
8. Everyone breaks the rules when they can get away with it so what's the difference? This is a universal cultural phenomenon	32	7
9. You see more flags in US than anywhere in the world and the biggest sums given to charity too so in fact they're pretty collectivistic.	32	7
10. Wealthy European countries are more concerned about sustainability and welfare: they are becoming more feminine	15	24

The items which were intended to be true were numbers 7 and 10. The results show that in neither case did a clear majority recognize this. All the other items were intended to be false and this was clearly recognized in numbers 2, 5, 8 and 9. However, in cases 1, 3, 4, 6, there was no consensus so that on a total of 6 out of 10 items students diverged significantly from the perception I considered to be correct.

Various explanations exist for these divergences. The situations as stated may not have given enough information to lead logically to the right conclusion or the wording may not have been clear enough. Nonetheless the responses suggest strongly important misunderstandings with respect to the meaning of etic value dimensions as noted in the breakdown above.

The most commonly misunderstood seem to be the following:

- The nature of individualism and collectivism, in which these are confused respectively with individual self-centred behaviour (referred to as idiocentric in the literature) and other centred behaviour (allocentric) (Triandis 1994).
- Confusion of risk taking and ambiguity avoidance
- Relationships between authority and individuals, which may be benevolent or purely power based
- Harmony seeking behaviour between peers and intolerance across social levels.

Apart from this the major source of confusion is failure to identify non-cultural explanations such as materialistic demonstration effects, out-group situations or non-comparable situations

Dealing with these confusions: the way forward for students

As noted above using etic value dimensions can lead to unwarranted projections from cultural to individual interpretative levels. Methodologically this is the problem of incompatibility between macro constructs and micro observations but for students it means false extrapolations. The use of rankings can also lead to conceptual confusion between statistical distributions and culture as a social force. The value dimensions approach apart from being controversial (see McSweeney on Hofstede for example) is susceptible to naïve simplistic and mistaken interpretations, and the reverse ecological fallacy of deducing a cultural trait from the behaviour of an individual (Hofstede 2001). How many times have we read a "case study" which projects the profile of an individual unthinkingly onto the societal background as "typical Indian" for example. In such cases there is not enough awareness of the need to understand context, the complexity and multiple triangulated data, the possibility that individual personality or circumstances make this case different in order to be more confident that we have interpreted behaviour and attitudes fairly.

In my courses we de-brief scenarios such as those described above but also longer cases in order to distinguish etic dimensions, emic culture-specific information and situational variables to underline the complexity of multiple explanatory factors. I emphasize the potential pitfalls that await students in interpreting events and behaviour in cross-cultural business and social situations in an excessively simplistic and potentially mistaken fashion. The emic/etic distinction, extensively used in the literature (Boisot 1995; Geertz 1975, Hofstede 2001; Triandis 1995 etc), is the methodological distinction between participant meanings and observer categorization and comparison and offers invaluable insights.

Emic factors are presented by elicitation from students as "how do you have a sense of identity?" or "How do you know where you are?" "What matters to them as members of their culture?" The purpose is to sensitize to non-quantitative aspects of culture, the "sense of place" and the values and meanings held by the people in question. This gives more background knowledge to act as a constraint on broad sweeping generalizations of the type "they have high power distance and low goal orientation" and enrich students awareness of cultures. One excellent idea in this area is autophotoghapy, in which photos are analyzed for the cultural information they reflect. The results can be very rich – especially if the temptation to lift ideas from the internet is resisted.

As Triandis observed we cannot compare emics (Triandis 1994): they have validity only for the specific culture. To know that Barça, Barcelona's most famous football team, is "mes que un club", a reference to Catalan resistance to the Franco regime, gives us a depth of understanding not found in etic dimensions rankings. This type of knowledge offers students a way out of the over-simplification of handfuls of numbers and rankings. Triangulation of data lends multi-dimensionality to perceptions and offers more context, reducing the dangers of inappropriate interpretations and giving a multi-dimensional understanding of cultures.

Conclusion

Cultural paradoxes arise where there is confusion in interpreting behaviours according to appropriate cultural dimensions: the lesson we draw is the need to exercise caution in etic comparative dimensional interpretations. The use of such dimensions is fraught with danger: the same result may be caused by different causes; the same cause in different contexts can produce different results. Resolving these paradoxes hinges on grasping the meaning of dimensions and their limitation in explaining actual behaviour. The comparative approach must be used with caution; all relevant variables must be taken into account. Firstly multiple dimensions are involved: probably about 20 are useful for analysis. Secondly a multiple triangulated approach using emic knowledge of participant meanings (Geertz 1973) and experiential learning about one's own and the target cultures lends a richer multi-faceted understanding of cultural phenomena.

The idea of value trumping is interesting; I take the view that this occurs where people have multi-cultural elements in their primary socialization and can indeed draw on a range of resources to deal with different situations, again reducing the predictability of behaviour and attitude.

Where situations are being compared there are always non-cultural as well as cultural variables concerned and these function on largely independent axes. Thus where we are comparing a formal situation such as a job interview and an informal one such as meeting a friend at his or her home the difference is non-cultural therefore no cultural conclusions can be drawn. However, cultural differences are differences of degree. The formality and punctuality appropriate in different circumstances vary with cultural context and are affected by value dimensions such as power distance, rigid time or social formality. The principle is "ceteris paribus": hold other things constant in order to make comparisons. Of course if enough different things are going on, it can be argued that one cannot hold them all equal and complex multi-cause situations have to be considered on their own terms.

Alexander Thomas' bilateral emics lie behind the Kulturstandard approach where insights are generated qualitatively by interview and narrative and thus have an emic content: the methodology considers the "ensemble" of characteristics rather than using imposed dimensions (Gábor 2009). This is in line with my experiential approach to understanding other cultures through the feelings and perceptions of the observer, a potential third way that aims to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable emic and etic methodologies.

Using all these approaches and reflections, my aim has always been to raise questions in students' minds and offer them an approach which will enable them to avoid mistakes and unjustified conclusions. The point is not that they are wrong but that they do not have grounds for assuming they are right: their conclusions have not been subjected to a respectable attempt at falsification. Inaccurate application of dimensions, ecological fallacies and the use of proxy based on inappropriate and incomplete dimension analyses are examples of woolly thinking about culture. Triangulated approaches, deeper knowledge of cultures and greater caution with contextual variables make it less likely that this type of lapsus will occur.

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