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CULTURE AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE! CULTURAL COMPETENCE REEXAMINED IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

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Abstract

The fundamental objective of this short presentation is to provide readers and intercultural practitioners with a brief exposé of key elements in neuroscientific research, linguistics, and cognitive psychology that are coming to the fore and may radically affect our understanding of culture and how it functions within us and between us. Contemporary concepts and practices in the field of intercultural learning and training applications need to be reexamined closely in the light of these fresh research elements. This paper proposes that they specifically be explored and evaluated in each of ten areas that are identified as potentially eliminating or seriously altering current thinking and/or praxis in the intercultural field. These areas are rather well established, but currently being further explored and developed by neurological research and cognitive science. They are likely to lead to new factors that will need to be taken into consideration in assessing intercultural thinking and practice in the near future.

Keywords: Neuroscience, constructionism, discourse, metanarrative, cultural mediator, storytelling,

Introduction

Definitions of culture abound, both in academic and professional discourse, too many to address, or perhaps even list in this short article. However, it is possible to test the level of their pertinence and usefulness by exploring how and to what degree contemporary research and insights substantiate alter, or even dismiss previously held definitions. In this process, we need to equip ourselves with the "culture-specific skills" that guarantee a good functioning with other cultures and successfully manage our understanding of cultural differences. Being part of a culture is not easily definable and describable, since culture should not be framed as big and commanding. It lies in "little things" and "mundane words like 'the' and 'I'" (Thrift, 2000). The academic contributions achieved in the disciplines of anthropology and discursive psychology push the discussion further suggesting that national identity "is not accomplished in grand displays" but rather through the smallest of details" (Thrift, 2000). Thus, little words like "the" and "we" which often stand "on the margins of conscious awareness have the power to determine our understanding of culture and uncover the deeply rooted, and often unconscious, definition of who we are (Thrift, 2000). Accordingly, expressions like "Arabs, Germans, Japanese" become relative and partial descriptions of one part or one side of what Arabs, Germans, or Japanese might be.

The national culture or character stereotype becomes no longer valid in this context. Although people may share certain features with others, they still have their own biographies and cultural repertoires, which are multidimensional. Cultural significances can be found in football teams, types of restaurants or individual departments and universities. Culture therefore is a "shifting reality anyway, and people make of it what they need to live their identities in different circumstances" (Holliday et al., 2010). By appealing to this idea, this research paper will move from macro to micro perceptions of cultures and decorticate the big narratives about identities and cultures. It will put into question the "one-story" approach and the dangerous effects it might have on defining cultures and identities.

Our aim here is to make sure that intercultural work is not stuck in its past and most importantly to justify the fact that culture does not only exist from without, that is in the material world, but also from within, in our minds, thoughts, and even unconscious framing of the events around us . In a previous blog posting, I attempted to identify the areas of intercultural thinking and activity which might be problematic. These included: lingering essentialism; ignoring context; cultural denial; implicit colonialism; and dyadic thinking (Simons, 2013). As a starting point for examining the current relevance of the various elements and instruments of the trade, this article proposes that the validity of elements of intercultural theory, pedagogy, and practice be reevaluated and possibly updated in the light of each of ten check points which will be individually identified and described below.

1. Human Integrity

Centuries of philosophical and popular dualism have left a deep essential division in a variety of cultures which frame the human individual in common thinking and language as composed of two specific seemingly alien elements, mind vs. matter, sometime fantasized as "the ghost in the machine". While the human being is multifunctional entity, neuroscientific research is telling us it is so precisely because of the integrity of physical neural system throughout the entire individual. Mind is matter, so to speak.

Consequently, we need to see that what call culture exists within us, is part of us literally and physically. Understanding this does not, however, reduce us to a mere mechanism. In the words of cognitive psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker (2003), "I don't believe there's free will in the sense of a spirit or soul. Behavior is the product of physical processes in the brain. But when you have such a complex brain, consisting of 100 billion neurons connected by 100 trillion synapses, human choices will not be predictable in any simple way." Creativity, imagination, innovation, and spirituality are not diminished by this perspective; they are simply produced in a fashion that differs from that of our traditional understanding.

2. Sensation & Cognition

While the human brain is the control center of our neurosystem, cognition flows throughout our entire system, head to toe. Not surprisingly we have long used numerous everyday expressions that reflect this, e.g.: I know in my heart…; My gut feeling says…; It's right on the tip of my tongue...; I've got an eye/feel/taste for…; He's a pain in the neck/butt…; She has a nose for…; etc. Despite our firm entry into what we call the "iconic age" it seems we lack good imagery, or metaphors for this holistic sense of the human system. There are lots of images of the brain and its various functional parts, but the brain itself is not the whole story and we don't seem to have effective ways of picturing that. Figure 1 shows a more wholistic image which appeared in a recent call for papers that seems to be moving in the right direction (Maximilians, 2021).

Figure 1: A more wholistic image for the personal neural system and interpersonal neural interaction,

3. Unconscious Framing

What we perceive with our senses, see, smell, hear, touch, and taste is automatically, unconsciously, and immediately framed and interpreted positively or negatively, beneficial, or dangerous, throughout our system. This is an essential part of our survival system. Our inventory of frames is likely to include things that we have experienced or have been told to value and enjoy, but also may generate its strongest messages in the form of fears that prompt us to instinctually flee from or fight what is presented as threatening to our system.

The frames that this system uses come from what we have been taught or experienced, in other words, how we have been acculturated. Thus, it is our personal storehouse of culture. Diversity specialists are likely to use the term "unconscious bias" for this function, focusing on the fact that stereotypes of others or fear of their unfamiliar differences may lead us to label them incorrectly, reject them, flee from them, or even let our fear lead us to do them harm in word or deed. The term "bias", though technically correct, is likely to be heard, at least in English, as an accusation and thus often proves to be counterproductive to the best intended DEI initiatives. For this reason, we have chosen to adopt and adapt the related term "framing" popularized by cognitive scientist George Lakoff (2014) who has deeply explored the political uses and consequences of this function in contemporary society.

4. Conscious Reflection

While our unconscious system automatically generates these frames or interpretations of what we sense going on around us, we also have a slower but very important conscious level of interpretation that can recognize these automatic frames, accept them, or reject them, or seek to apply other cultural frames, or simply withhold judgment in favor of curiosity and discovery.

This function has the capacity to examine and evaluate, to reframe and even to some degree reprogram the cultural framing system by repeated conscious reinterpretation of its offerings and making choices contrary to the automatic frames offered by our unconscious. Thus, we exercise our agency in the creation or modification of our inner culture that may express itself in our words and actions and thus affect the culture of others. Conscious Reflection is often described today as "slow thinking", while Unconscious Framing is spoken of as "fast thinking", terms popularized by the work of Daniel Kahneman (2011).

5. Social/Cultural Construction

How we understand ourselves and the worlds we live in are the product of social construction. What we understand as knowledge and meaning result from how we use our cultural roots to construct aspects of our reality and develop the culture of these aspects, the "worlds" we live in. One author lists 11 significant constructed worlds among which are:

government, race, gender, family, and religion (Paolantonio, 2016). One might certainly add the economic system. The culture we create with these constructs, both concrete and neural, is and reflects our ongoing effort to survive and succeed in the environments and contexts in which we find ourselves and with which we identify.

6. Creative Discourse

These constructs are natural but created, reinforced, and passed on by societies and the individuals within them. The various societies and groups we identify with will inevitably create their own versions of these cultural constructs; and these may differ or even conflict when cultures meet. They abound and shape our daily lives. We are constantly "talking to ourselves" as well as talking to each other in our words, behaviors, work, and arts. This phenomenon of discourse has been brilliantly described by Epstein (2008), who suggests that "as a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations", discourse plays an important role in constructing social and physical realities. It allows individuals to give meaning to their ways of living as well as to the world around them. It is this social dimension of discourse that grants individuals the opportunity to interact and function socially and (de)legitimize certain social practices. Consequently, the ritualization and normalization of these interactions and practices can lead to a 'common sense' knowledge that becomes hard and even impossible to change or to question.

The capacity of discourse to allow certain meanings and ways of thinking while excluding others reinforces its role in stabilizing and fixing dominant understandings of reality. Hence, the upshot is a routinized discourse that promotes "symbolic domination" through a new form of power. This form does not need coercion. Rather, it functions at the level of meaning and social interactions. In an attempt to move beyond the physical dimension of power that exclusively associates it with property and appropriation, Foucault (2003, cited in Epstein, 2008) asserts that power is anchored in the social body. It is no longer "a quality, an attribute, or a capacity of the subject (individual or state)." By implication, discourse becomes a primary source of hegemony and hegemonic understandings of identity thanks to its capacity to "define what can count as true, what remain hidden and what can be seen" (Muller, 2008).

Those of us raised in a Judeo-Christian culture may detect an echo here of the words of Genesis, "God said, 'Let there be light': and there was light." Culturally speaking, I am a creator and destroyer of worlds – and so are you! Cultural creation is an ongoing process in which the discourse of each of us, within and expressed in what we do and create "speaks into being" our cultural realities (Simons, 2013).

7. Metanarratives

Metanarrative is a term developed by French sociologist Jean-François Lyotard to describe the product of discourse, A metanarrative is a "big story" that integrates history, social and culturally constructed phenomena based upon on an appeal to universal values to give meaning and purpose to life. It provides an identity-generating frame to a culture's more specific narratives, stories, and to what it values and produces. These are the overarching stories that a culture tells itself, expressions of its unconscious belief system, concealing its contradictions and inconsistencies, past and present (Mambrol, 2016). Metanarrative often functions as a kind of identity defense system.

Metanarratives thus become the domain often exploited by political leadership, especially the current breed of "strongmen", for their own acquisition, validation, and exercise of power over others. Lyotard, as a standard bearer of Postmodernism, identified and opposed the untruthful nature of metanarratives and argued for more focused, detailed, and

particular stories as harbingers of reality. These grand narratives are an essential part of understanding the dynamics of culture as it is seen, used, and developed today. A case in point is Trump's meta-narrative or even fairytale scenario of a great America, which communicated a racist and exclusive perception of the US culture and drew on a highly selective remembering of the past that attributed membership in the group to certain ethnic and racial criteria. The story that Trump told to the US American people is that of a mythologized homogenous US American culture that overlooks the country's long history of diversity and multiculturalism. The cultural resources and intermediaries that Trump drew upon in communicating his vision of US American identity is Christian nationalism and ethno-racial purity. He blends Christian and patriotic narratives and iconography with the myths of racial purity and superiority. By implication, meta-narratives and discourse more generally become the primary source of hegemony and hegemonic understandings of identity thanks to their capacity to determine what should be seen as true and what should be kept hidden.

Safe and honest storytelling is currently becoming more and more understood as a potential antidote to the general infection of metanarratives. It is not surprising that, with the tsunami of fake news perpetuated in public and online that there is an increasing need for ways to promote honest face-to-face that connects people together rather than dividing them by labels. The relevance and importance of storytelling and methodologies for it, supported by neuroscientific findings has strongly impacted intercultural work in recent years. For example, gamified discussions conducted by colleagues of ours are in their third year of meeting regularly online.

As a soft power instrument strategic narratives are kernel in determining meaning. Accordingly, the adoption of a particular understanding of identity is the ultimate result of a successful strategic narrative which draw upon different ideational resources and variants of identity in different ways to achieve certain objectives. However, the power of strategic narratives should not be exclusively limited to the ideas and meanings communicated by certain actors but also to the materialization of these ideas in our everyday lives. For Feklyunina (2015), the strong linkages established between soft power and narratives of collective identity imply that soft power is "always at work, shaping the psychological milieu of the relationship – increasing, decreasing or even disappearing together with the evolution of identities and interests."

As the perspectives that we have tried to elucidate in this paper are entering into our disciplines, the consequences are too grave for everyday life for us not to be engaged with them. While politics, populism, commerce, and economics easily come to mind in what we have discussed, the consequences for every field of human endeavor are staring us in the face. For example, therapists and health caregivers need be aware of their own metanarratives and those of their clients and the stores hidden in what they prescribe. When a metanarrative is in force, its application is likely to be mechanical rather than fully insightful. Ethan Watters, for example, showed how US psychological metanarratives of mental and emotional ailments have been beamed and memed around the world, along with the home country remedies prescribed. In the cases Watters cites, these narratives in fact constructed cultural epidemics instead of meeting local therapeutic needs (Watters, 2010).

With the emergence of the CLAS legislation for US healthcare in 2004, our colleague Suzanne Salimbene (1998) launched gamified educational tools addressed to the healthcare industry which enabled healthcare organizations and caregivers to become aware of and respond to the healthcare narratives that dominated diverse cultures and populations. Similar efforts were made in Europe, particularly in Germany. These provided insights and approaches to culturally competent communication for reducing ethnic and racial healthcare disparities (Taylor & Lurie, 2004).

8. Cultural Intermediaries

The existence of socially constructed cultural entities and metanarratives, widely embraced and both consciously and unconsciously and resident in a group of people, offers a point of access to those who are adequately skilled to formulate the idea, product, activity, or movement that they wish to create or "sell", if they can express it as a story in words and images coherent with the imbedded cultural narrative of the individual or group they wish to influence.

Cultural intermediaries mediate how their "goods" are perceived by others, by framing those goods as culturally legitimate and identity bound, and thereby adding symbolic and motivational value to them (Maguire, 2015). The most effective influencers, whether commercial, political, or social are those who have mastered the skills to do this consistently and the energy and conduits to do it repeatedly. Thus, our understanding of cultures today requires awareness of their ability to serve as a marketplace (a substantial contemporary metanarrative) whose offerings can be acquired and used (or abused) by those conversant with the dominant frames found in social constructions and meta narratives resident in our neurosystems.

Cultural symbols do matter in identity management. They play a paramount role in branding identity at the national and international level. Some today go as far as to talk about a post-modern world of identity construction in which branding the nation's international image and influence through the use of certain cultural intermediaries is given more attention than the tangible and actual cultural attributes embodied by the country itself. Part of these marketing strategies is the promotion of a good reputation through invoking certain emblems whether physical or imaginative or historical moments that would furnish the image of identity to spread to the rest of the world. This external projection of identity has never been stable. Rather, it is constantly produced and reproduced depending on the context. Even more, the external projection of identity is not exclusively held at the state level, since we are daily selecting the elements of our identity that we want to expose to the external world. This selection is highly conscious. It depends on the setting, the interlocutor, and the cultural resources we invoke. This is particularly relevant given the argument that norms are defined as 'a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

9. Identities and Decision-Making

After centuries of well-intended philosophical and intellectual effort to enthrone reason over feeling and flesh, contemporary evidence for the integrity of the human system forces us to reexamine how identity is created and decisions are made. Pop psychology in much of the Western world centers on the task of building an individual identity, "finding oneself", strongly echoing what has been labelled as individualism in many intercultural studies. However, identity is multi-faceted even in cultures that tend to be described as communitarian.

It is perhaps, as Phuong Mai Nguyen (2017) suggests, that identity is inevitably a culturally constructed reality that, like other constructions, can only be known by how it shows up in the variety of contexts that one moves through in life. The single identity is perhaps a bit like the single story, which can be limiting. Given the context, an individual may be a grandparent, an employee, a football fan, a taxpayer. There is the endless challenge of understanding to what degree identities are chosen by those who wear them or bestowed upon them benevolently or abusively.

Poet Chris Dingman, aka Chris Spark, provides a very useful metaphor for culture and identity – the clothes we are given to wear and choose to don from birth onwards in the multiple contexts into which life brings us. The size, cost, variety, adherence to, and sporting of this wardrobe may vary enormously from one cultural context to another. We are not what we wear unless we choose to dress for the occasion and be so. This also raises the uncomfortable issue of "when it is time to clean the closet".

"One who speaks only one language is one person, but one who speaks two languages is two people." This Turkish Proverb reminds us of the alternative potential to our dominant metanarratives. Fluent bilingualism is not the only way to become conscious of the existence of constructing alternative realities. However, when we experience one of our multiple linguistic identities in action, it is a convincing experience of the possibility that we have the potential to construct and face the challenge and responsibility of choosing to create an identity.

10. Context, Communication & Connection – the core of Cultural Competence

When these perspectives that we are discussing are understood, it becomes clear that cultural competence is not a static definable state, or a collection of discernable behaviors but an integrated process and practice which consciously seeks to engage in the ongoing assessment and construction of our survival and success personally and socially. It is our cultural self, drawing on its individual and common resources to listen to, expand, and steer our shared discourse as it seeks to understand, evaluate, preserve, discard, create, share, and implement the elements, small and large, beneficial to our present and future well-being in each context in which we find ourselves.

The environments into which we are born, raised, and operate engender the genetic and cultural frames that live in our system and are realized in our behaviors according to the context in which they are perceived. Mai Nguyen clearly pictures the constituent operational elements which constitute how we conceive of and operate within a context in this diagram which are operative and can be come to light in the stories we tell. The diagram embodies what we are currently discovering through cognitive and neuroscientific research.

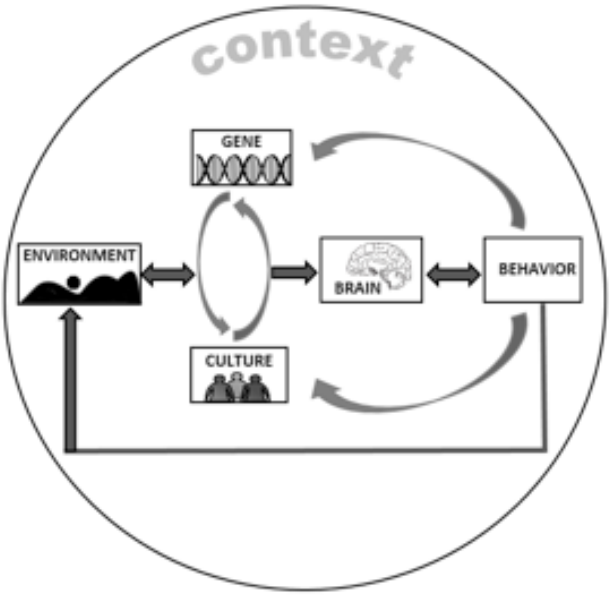

Figure 2: Diagram of Diversity Pathways (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2017)

Communication and connection with each other are not the result of cultural competence. Rather, they are how it is created, shaped, activated, and exercised. The

exchange of stories is not just the recounting of facts and research or the citing of reasons, though these may be raw materials for its construction. Rather our decisions and actions rely on how our identity pictures and accepts these for inclusion as coherent parts of ourselves in each context in which we find ourselves functioning. Compelling "logic" is such because of its identification with and/or our ability to shape and fit it into our diverse identity narratives and roles as they appear in each context in which we place or find ourselves.

Conclusion

If in applying the above ten focus points, we discover a mismatch with our current intercultural theory or praxis, the question becomes, "What now?" Certainly, the first step involves a very close scrutiny of what is working and what is failing in our comprehension of culture and remodeling our discourse in how we present it to ourselves and others. This involves deeper and continuing reading and reflection on the research reflected in this short synopsis. We need to recognize and deal with it professionally but cannot do so reliably without being clear about how it reflects and relates to our acceptance of our own identity and cultural constructivity.

It goes without saying then, that if we would exercise cultural competence as parents, teachers, trainers, coaches, or mentors, we require tools to foster, encourage, and facilitate the safe exchange of the storied fragments of identity and the contexts in which they occur. We need methodology that brings us closer together and connects us as our neurosystems mirror each other. Storytelling games and activities which promote this exchange have been an essential part of contemporary intercultural praxis and collaboration and the movement of many professionals is growing in this direction. Leading in this work, interculturalist Joanna Sell, citing the insight of Jerome Bruner that "Culture is a set of stories that we enter", has been produced an online series of explorative storytelling interviews as the heart of her work. We have had the privilege of being engaged in numerous collaborations to create and apply such instruments, particularly with online game series that bring people together across cultures by stimulating the exchange of cultural experience stories. (diversophy®)

Finally, culture is everybody's business. It doesn't simply concern those who do the teaching in various contexts but affects the shape of interactions at every level. Organizers of a recent conference of the Swiss chapter of the Society for Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR) asked its presenters of research papers to make sure that they included the actual or potential applications of the research they were conducting and reporting. There is a narrative, perhaps in many cases an unconscious one, which often discourages academics from getting their hands dirty with gardening their ideas in the turf beyond the academic campus.

We would very much like to see much more intensive research into the metanarratives which construct our realities, including those which deal with our own work. Only recently have our intercultural colleagues begun to discuss the task of the decolonization of our disciplines and procedures, our ways about thinking about how we think and work. It is our hope that this short paper will contribute insight and motivation for this important mission, among others, as we challenge metanarratives by sharing our particular stories.

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