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Cultural Metaphors: Their Use in Management Practice as a Method for Understanding Cultures

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Abstract

This paper argues that the dimensional perspective on culture, arguably the most important development in cross-cultural understanding in 50 years, needs to be supplemented by in-depth treatments of national cultures. Such a treatment is the goal of a cultural metaphor, which is any activity, phenomenon, or institution with which members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, cultural metaphors reflect the underlying values of a culture. Examples of national cultural metaphors include the Japanese garden, the Chinese family altar, and American Football. The paper also argues that the focus on specific national cultures can lead to the insight provided by cross-cultural paradoxes.

Important remark: Examples of specific applications and exercises that various instructors have developed for cultural metaphors and cross-cultural paradoxes are provided in unit 11.

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Introduction

It is a truism that an educator must know the audience he or she is trying to influence, either cognitively or emotionally. This is particularly valid for a management educator and trainer in the cross-cultural area, as undergraduate business students, MBA (Master of Business Administration) students and seasoned managers frequently constitute difficult audiences, especially when their exposure to cultures other than their own is limited. These students and managers have only a small amount of time to devote to a particular subject, and they tend to prefer classes and training sessions that give them specific guidance and understanding that they can immediately or soon apply to their work, that is, "takeaways." Two examples should suffice:

- I presented a seminar on cultural metaphors, the subject of this article, to a group of managers, one of whom approached me afterwards. He was the President and CEO of a medium-sized furniture-making company in North Carolina. Until his 50th birthday, he had never been outside of the United States. During the next five years he traveled to 55 nations doing business. He desperately needed some shorthand way of understanding the non-U.S. managers with whom he was negotiating, as the North Carolina furniture business was under heavy assault by the Chinese and other groups. As discussed below, cultural metaphors are a quick and efficient way to alleviate his problem.

- I co-directed for several years an 11-course internal certificate training program that is required for managerial promotion at a large company that has achieved considerable international success in recent years; each course lasted one day. Most of the courses were concerned with such specific issues as international financing and governmental regulations, and only two of them focused on genuine cross-cultural issues (international negotiating and cross-cultural understanding for business success). I co-taught the second of these two courses and was always impressed how difficult it is for the managers, almost all of whom work at least 50 hours a week and sometimes much more, to fit in the reading assignments and the time for the session itself for this one course and, of course, for the other ten courses in the program and additional courses outside of it that are also required for promotion. My role as a management educator and trainer is to provide some added value or something meaningful in a few hours of interaction with these hard-working and frequently overworked managers.

Such an educator has at his disposal the large number of training techniques that have been developed in the cross-cultural area over the years. And I do take advantage of them, using short experiential exercises, video clips of cross-cultural interactions followed by a discussion of what was happening cross-culturally, and so forth. Over the years I developed my own perspective and method, cultural metaphors, that allows the educator

to incorporate all or most of these techniques into a training program that can extend from one and one-half hours to 60 hours. The interested reader can look at my book "Working Across Cultures: Applications and Exercises" for a description of 70 exercises that go beyond the concept that cross-cultural differences exist, which unfortunately is the point at which many training sessions end (Gannon, 2001; the book is now reprinted for public use on <http://faculty.csusm.edu/mgannon/>).

However, students and managers want to understand much more, specifically how they can apply the concepts and lessons learned to their actual work situations. That is, these exercises are integrated through cultural metaphors which focus on management issues and practices in such areas as advertising, business strategy, and negotiating. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their classic work on metaphors argue that "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor." (p. 1). That is, humans compare a new and uncertain situation to something with which they are thoroughly familiar in order to understand it.

For example, a popular metaphor for an organization is that it is a machine, which then can easily create a situation in which managers construct their organizations using principles applicable to a physical machine such as an automobile. In this case subordinates would have only limited authority and there would be close supervision and many organizational levels. This way of designing organizations is not compatible with intense competition that may be global, rapidly changing technology, and decreased product life cycles. A more pertinent metaphor might be guerrilla warfare with its flexible use of troops, rapid change in plans, and strong ideological commitment or strong organizational culture. Thus the selection of the correct metaphor is not only important but also frequently essential for success to be achieved.

In essence, a metaphor is only as good as the value it creates in providing new insights and increased understanding. But a cultural metaphor is even more complex, as it involves aggregations of individuals. I define a cultural metaphor as follows: It is any distinctive or unique activity, phenomenon, or institution with which all or most members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, the metaphor represents the underlying values expressive of the culture itself. Frequently, outsiders have a difficult time relating to and/or understanding the underlying values of a culture, and the goal of using cultural metaphors is to address this difficulty. Culture allows us to fill in the blanks, often unconsciously, when action is required, and cultural metaphors help us to see the values leading to action. This is probably the most interesting feature of culture.

Each of us uses metaphors, and when we begin to apply this concept to culture, we are dealing with cultural metaphors. American Football represents a classic cultural metaphor that those outside the national culture have difficulty understanding. Its unique or at least distinctive features that can be easily seen in the operation of U.S. American business include:

- The tailgate party or pregame party taking place in parking lots at the stadium. Everyone is very friendly and having fun, although the fans do not know one another personally in many instances. In some instances parts of the parking lot are cordoned off for specific purposes, such as involving those who contribute to a particular cause.
- Pre-game and half-time entertainment that frequently involves the playing of the national anthem, silent prayer by the players and fans, and fabulous marching bands and entertainment.
- Strategy and war. Football is a complicated game involving specific strategies by both teams, and its relationship to both war and business is easy to discern. Similarly, the United States is a litigious society governed by innumerable rules, similar to the manner in which the football game occurs.
- Related to the above, football involves a long pre-season training camp in which each player must learn the many complex plays in the playbook that each team develops in its quest to win. Football is the only game in the world in which each player acts individually in terms of the specific play that the quarterback calls but all players on the field are in motion simultaneously, and failure can easily occur if even one player deviates from the action expected of him.
- Individualized specialized achievement within the team structure. Everyone has a specialized role to play in the game, as in business, but there is both cooperation and competition on the team for the individual rewards that each team offers to its successful players.
- The game is characterized by aggression, high risks, and unpredictable outcomes, and if success occurs, high rewards are given to those responsible for it. Most if not all players are rewarded on the winning team, but the rewards are not given equally to all, as might be expected in a culture more focused on equality of outcomes.
- Huddling. Football is the only game in the world in which the offensive team huddles after each play to plan briefly for the next play. A direct business correlate can be found in the daily ten-minute Wal-Mart meeting in each of its stores in which all stand while specific actions for that day are discussed.
- The church of football and celebrating perfection. The symbolic relationship between football and religion is manifested by the playing of the national anthem, silent prayers, and thanking God when a seriously injured player is escorted off the field to receive medical attention, thus avoiding more serious injury. The U.S.A. is still a religious society, and much more so than many other nations, and this focus is symbolically present in many aspects of U.S. American life, including business.

Managers seem to agree that American football is an effective metaphor for understanding the growing complexity of modern business. At the turn of the 20th Century baseball may have represented an effective metaphor, as it reflected both a link to the United States' agrarian origins and as a way of talking about figures and data, e.g., runs batted in. As Kaufman (1999, October 22) points out, today "(m)any business leaders see their game as more like football, with its image of interdependent players with multiple skills cooperating

to move the ball down a long field 10 yards at a time." And even the jargon or popular vocabulary of American football dominates business meetings and activities, for example, "going for the blitz," "getting to the red zone," "fall back and punt," and "throwing a Hail Mary Pass." Not surprisingly, then, American football is our cultural metaphor for the United States.

Rob Norton (2002, July 22) in commenting on the business scandals that have erupted since 2000, titled his column, "Sick of Scandal? Blame Football!" He compares the worldwide popularity of soccer (or football to the rest of the world) and the national popularity of American football, focusing on one specific difference: The number and complexity of rules in American football. But there are other critical aspects of football, and even Americans not interested in the game would do well understanding them. Not surprisingly, football is the cultural metaphor for the United States.

In 1994, Sage published the first edition of "Understanding Global Cultures" (Gannon, 1994; 2001, 2nd ed.; 2004, 3rd ed.; Gannon & Pillai, 2010, 4th ed.; Gannon & Pillai, 5th ed. in press). It contained only 18 chapters: An introductory chapter plus in-depth treatments of 17 national cultures through the use of the methodology of cultural metaphors as described in chapter 1. As in the American football example above, the specific features of each cultural metaphor served as the major subheadings in each chapter. To highlight this fact, there are two tables of contents: A brief table of contents and an extended table of contents in which the specific features of each national culture are the subheadings within the chapter. In the first edition there were no parts. Over time the complexity of the book has grown, and there is now 35 chapters separated into 12 parts. The unit of analysis in "Understanding Global Cultures" is the nation, but cultural metaphors can also be used for ethnic groups within nations, clusters of nations, and even continents.

Another example of a cultural metaphor is the Japanese garden, which includes the following key features: Wa (group harmony); Shikata (a seemingly excessive and large number of rules governing behavior, e.g., not crossing the street at a red light at 2 a.m. in the morning when there is no one in the area); Seishin or spirit training designed to make the mind control the body through the use of such techniques as meditation, judo, and kendo or sword fighting; combining droplets or energies to accomplish group goals; and aesthetics, as the Japanese sense of aesthetics is unique.

As suggested above, MBAs and seasoned managers constitute a tough audience, and the rule most experienced educators and trainers follow is to get them actively involved in the first three to five minutes of any session. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways:

- Start off with a series of non-threatening but meaningful questions with which all will be comfortable. For example, Samuel Huntington, whose book "The Clash of Civilizations" provoked a worldwide debate (Huntington, 1996), subsequently coedited a book, "Culture Matters" (Harrison & Huntington, 2000). Such questions include: Does culture matter? If it does matter, does it matter all of the time? – If not, when does culture matter?

- Begin with a short experiential exercise.
- Start off with a video clip demonstrating a cross-cultural problem or problems and ask: What do you think is going on?

Once students and managers are actively involved, it is much easier to present more difficult material. For example, arguably the most influential work on culture since the 1950s has been completed by cross-cultural researchers who have empirically demonstrated that there are dimensions along which nations can be arrayed or ranked, but many management educators have difficulty using this dimensional perspective to train MBAs and managers because of its abstract nature. Geert Hofstede (2001) is the best known of such researchers, and I typically present his five dimensions of cultures and the scores for a selected group of nations. These dimensions include individualism-collectivism (the degree to which the group influences the individual when making decisions) and power distance (the degree to which there is wide disparities in power and prestige in a nation's culture). I then ask: What is incomplete about this framework? Ordinarily a dead silence occurs. It is then easy to point out that these dimensions provide an excellent starting point for understanding a nation's culture, but that they do not give a real-world sense of what actually happens in cross-cultural interactions. For example, understanding Japanese culture through the use of the Japanese garden goes far beyond the five dimensional scores on Japan that Hofstede presents, especially when its essential characteristics are contrasted with the essential characteristics of American football.

This conclusion came from my own attempts to use Hofstede's dimensions in understanding Thais when residing in Thailand. After much additional reading and frequent conversations with Thais, I had almost given up until I read John Fieg's influential comparative description of Thais and Americans (Fieg, 1976; Fieg & Mortlock, 1989). In both cultures there is a love of freedom, a dislike of pomposity, and a pragmatic outlook. But the differences are vast. For example, the Thais follow a complex group-oriented authority-ranking system of status in which the leader is expected to ensure the welfare of subordinates, much as a father or mother would protect their children. Thus Thais tend to be more group-oriented or collectivistic and to more readily accept distances in power and status than Americans.

Fieg (1976) uses the metaphor of a rubber band to demonstrate the critical differences. In the United States, the rubber band is held tautly between the two fingers most of the time, and is relaxed only periodically, for example, at a Christmas party. In Thailand, the rubber band is loosely held most of the time, as evidenced by the fact that Thais feel that work should be *sanuk* or fun. In fact, the Thai word for work, *ngan*, is also translated as fun. However, when a superior issues an order, compliance tends to be swift, after which the relaxed atmosphere returns. Further, the Thais want everyone to be happy, which is why the Thai Smile is so famous worldwide, but they hate complainers. Related to this approach to life is the concept of *mai pen rai*, which is virtually untranslatable. This concept has been rendered as "never mind," "don't worry about anything," "things happen and it is best to accept them without anguish," and "going with the flow." Carol Hollinger, an American secondary teacher in Thailand in the 1950ies, authored a classic book with

the title *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* published by Houghton Mifflin in 1965, and it is still popular (see Hollinger, 1977). Broadly speaking, the training program I have developed emphasizes three areas:

- The dimensional perspective
- Cross-cultural communication, particularly the influential work by Edward Hall (see Hall & Hall, 1990)
- Cultural metaphors

To provide both a sense of closure and meaningfulness (that is, the "takeaways") in an MBA class or management training seminar, we use a number of techniques. One of the most popular is the presentation of these three perspectives followed by an extended Marketing/Advertising exercise during which the trainees are asked to use all three approaches in developing an advertisement, including a slogan of 50 words or less, that a travel agency in the United States could use to attract visitors from a specific nation. This exercise is very meaningful to MBA students and managers, as the tourist and travel related industry constitutes at least 10% of GNP in many nations. In some nations this percentage is far higher. The difficulty, of course, is to have some overlap between American football and the cultural metaphor for the selected nation, as visitors must feel comfortable. But there cannot be total overlap, as there would be no reason for visiting the United States.

The exercise can be completed during class, as the class is broken into small groups, each assigned to work on a specific nation, for 30 minutes, followed by class presentations. Alternatively, each small group can complete the exercise as a homework assignment, preparing a PowerPoint and/or music presentation. For example, the cultural metaphor for Thailand is the Thai Kingdom, as it is one of the few functioning kingdoms in the world. The King, who has been in power for over 50 years, is revered, and tourists have been arrested for throwing Thai money on the ground because it contains the King's image. The slides that an MBA team included in their presentation were the following:

- Slide 1. TRAVELING IN THE UNITED STATES
- Slide 2. AN EXTENDED SANUK....VACATION PACKAGES IN THE UNITED STATES FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY (Accompanied by three pictures of: a Thai family camping; large lighted buildings in Las Vegas; and Mickey Mouse at Disney World)
- Slide 3. HOW ABOUT AN EXTENDED SANUK? Come share your smile with us, while we share our culture with you! We offer the best in vacations in the United States! Mai Pen Rai, come visit the U.S.A. (No pictures for this slide).
- Slide 4. From excitement...to relaxation come discover the beauty of our country. We've got vacation spots that are right for you, your family and your friends. City, Country, Beach, Disney World. See it all with us. And there are discounts for groups of 6 or more. (One picture of a Thai teenager gawking out of an open car window.)

- Slide 5. Excitement package #1: Gambling, boxing matches, and musical and dance performances in Las Vegas (There is one picture of a card about the size of a card from a deck of playing cards with three overlapping images: A dice on the left, a pharaoh's image that is prominent in Las Vegas in the middle, and a playing card on the right.)
- Slide 6. Excitement package #2: Family entertainment for all ages at Disney World, with rides, rides, rides...and the world-famous Animal Kingdom (One picture, again of Mickey Mouse, but this time with a Thai boy.)
- Slide 7. Relaxation package #1: Relaxation in Florida. Card games by the pool, chess on the deck, biking on the boardwalk, and picnics on the beach. (On the right one picture of a male Thai teenager riding a bike on whose handles a female Thai teen-ager happily sits; a second picture below the description is a picture of a beautiful beach, with a ship on the horizon.)
- Slide 8. Relaxation package #2: California tour. *Pai thieo* (traveling) from San Diego to San Francisco: a mix of bike, boat, bus, and foot tours. (Two pictures are below, one of which is a large ship powered by sails toward which many Thais are walking, the second of which is a small group of Thais standing at the back of a motorized ship as a bridge recedes into the horizon.)

The MBA team explained that they had taken this approach in constructing the advertisement because the people of Thailand, as explained previously, enjoy *sanuk*, and this is accompanied by a natural gregariousness. The ad was designed to appeal to this combination. To ensure that the Thais felt comfortable reading the advertisement, the team emphasized both formal and spontaneous opportunities for leisure and fun or *sanuk*. In short, the team sought to give a feeling that, because of both the formal and spontaneous opportunities, there was a 100% probability that the vacation would be a great success. Even the picture of the Pharaoh was an attempt to link the cultural metaphor of the Thai Kingdom to the advertisement.

Another meaningful approach that allows for closure is to develop a company-specific cross-cultural case in which the trainees must select one of three partners for a joint venture, for example, a Korean, Brazilian, or German partner. The trainees must also complete a "cultural diagnostic matrix" that includes the concepts covered in the training session, for example, individualism, power distance, etc., and show how the differences relate to the metaphor for each nation. If a company-specific case is not available, there is a large number of cross-cultural cases that can be obtained through the websites of the Harvard Business School, the Darden Graduate School of Business at the University of Virginia, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, etc.

In short, a cultural metaphor represents a way to obtain new and deep insights into a group's or nation's culture. Cultural metaphors also provide a method for discussing cross-cultural issues, differences, and similarities in a collegial rather than a stereotypical and perhaps hostile fashion. In developing such insights, it is critical that the cross-cultural research be taken into consideration, and it is for this reason that both the dimensional perspective and the communication perspective should supplement cultural metaphors.

Cultural metaphors represent only a starting point for understanding a culture; they are easy to use, but do require much thought to avoid inaccurate stereotyping; and they can be supplemented by other methods. Most importantly, cultural metaphors allow managers with limited time to gain some understanding of a group or nation's culture that they can apply quickly to the myriad problems that they face daily in international activities.

Cross-Cultural Paradoxes

Inevitably, it seemed that my study of the use of cross-cultural dimensions and cultural metaphors led me to consider the issue of cross-cultural paradoxes. For example, while Hofstede's research indicated that the U.S.A. is the most individualistic nation of the 49 nations and four territories he treats as nations, it can also be highly collectivistic, as was evidenced after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Smith and Berg (1997), in fact, treat the individualism-collectivism paradox as fundamental to understanding organizational behavior. In this section I will define a paradox, provide some examples, and suggest that the reader interested in cross-cultural paradoxes peruse my 2008 book "Paradoxes of Culture and Globalization", which describes 93 cross-cultural paradoxes and has exercises and case studies that can facilitate significant involvement of students and managerial trainees.

Based on reality, a paradox is a statement, or a set of related statements, containing interrelated elements that are opposed to one another or in tension with one another or inconsistent with one another or contradictory to one another (that is, either/or), thus seemingly rendering the paradox untrue when in fact it is true (both/and) (for good reviews of the literature on paradox see Smith & Lewis, 2011, and Smith & Berg, 1997). Many of the definitions of paradox are incomplete in one way or another. For example, de Mooij (2010), in an otherwise superior book on cross-cultural advertising and marketing, defines a paradox as a statement that seems to be untrue, but is in fact true. It is much more. The key elements of a paradox are that it:

- is a reality that can be expressed in a statement or set of statements;
- contains interrelated contradictory or inconsistent elements that are in tension with one another;
- leads to the creation of a reality, and any statement or set of statements about this reality or paradox that is seemingly untrue due to the "vicious" circle generated by the contradictory or inconsistent elements is in fact true; and
- is framed or conceptualized as an either-or choice that is better framed as a both-and choice.

For example, several writers have noted the paradox that both globalization and nationalism are increasing simultaneously, which seems contradictory but is not (e.g., Naisbett, 1994). One implication of this simultaneous increase is that nationalism may stymie and even reverse the movement toward globalization or the increasing economic interdependence among companies, nations, and individuals. Others have pointed out that

time can be considered as three circles (past, present, and future) or as only one circle (Gannon, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). While members of Western cultures tend to view time as three circles, their Eastern counterparts frequently see it as only one circle. Both perspectives exist simultaneously, that is, they represent a both-and perspective. These differing viewpoints can lead to difficulties in cross-cultural understanding, interactions, and negotiations, especially if they are not consciously recognized.

To facilitate interaction as quickly as possible in a class, I frequently ask class members to define what a paradox is (without using their smart phones or computers to look up a definition on google.com). Typically there is great variance in the answers. In the Table of Contents of Gannon (2008), each of the 93 cross-cultural paradoxes is framed in terms of a question. I divide the class into small groups and ask them to select one to three of the paradoxes that group members find most interesting, and why. This information is then shared with the class and I provide the answers from the book. There are other exercises and case studies of cross-cultural paradoxes in such areas as leadership, motivation, and group behavior; communicating across cultures; crossing cultures; cross-cultural negotiations; multi-ethnicity; religion; geography; immigration; economic development; globalization; business strategy; and international human resource management.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What is a metaphor? Why is a metaphor useful in understanding other cultures or countries?
2. Gannon and his colleagues used "American Football" as a metaphor for the U.S. Do you think this is the best metaphor for the U.S.? Why or why not? Do you think that U.S. citizens tend to use different metaphors for their country than people from outside the U.S.? Why or why not? If you are a U.S. citizen, can you think of metaphors that people in other countries would use for the U.S.?
3. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of the cross-cultural dimensional approach and cultural metaphors?
4. Think of your own ethnic heritage. What metaphor or metaphors would you use to describe it? Why?

5. To help capture the meaning of metaphors in this context, try to identify metaphors for the following: a) Your college or university; b) the city in which you live; c) your hometown; and d) the neighborhood in which you grew up.
6. As indicated in the paper, it is frequently said that the most interesting feature of culture is that people respond unconsciously or semi-consciously in terms of their basic values when making decisions. Which approach seems to best capture the dynamics of such reactions, cross-cultural dimensions or cultural metaphors? Why?
7. What cautions should you take when using cultural metaphors?
8. What ways do you personally use to understand cross-cultural differences? Can you use cultural metaphors in combination with them? If yes, how? If no, why not?
9. What is a paradox? After defining, try to develop a cross-cultural paradox that is not described in this area or in Gannon (2008). How are the two perspectives of cross-cultural dimensions and cultural metaphors related to cross-cultural paradoxes?

See unit 11 for examples of cultural metaphors and paradoxes provided by different instructors.