

Selected Topics in Business Administration:

Cultural Issues

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A CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

CONCEPTUALISING COMMUNITIES

According to Parekh (1997: 167) a cultural community is a community whose members are characterised by a particular way of doing. They are formed through the:

- establishment of an identity based on similarity and difference
- construction of values, ideals of excellence, norms of behaviour regulating in-group social life
- representation and expression of similarity and difference
- encouragement of specific traits of temperament, moral dispositions, motivational structures and modes of expressing them

TYPIFICATIONS

Brislin (1981: 73-79) argues that the perceived similarities and differences between identities lead to constructing categories, basically around the difference between 'us' and 'them'. These categories or typologies can be constructed through:

- stereotyping: reducing, exaggerating, and essentialising personality and cultural traits into widely recognised features that fix difference
- conspicuous differentiation: establishing standards for comparison, thus separating what is normal from what is unacceptable
- familiarity: using frames of reference, thus assessing the degree of deviation from what is familiar
- functional importance: manipulating existing categories for one's advantage according to the circumstance
- maximisation of in-group advantage: making judgements in terms of what is acceptable and beneficial to one's in-group
- projection and externalisation: transferring one's negative feelings from the in-group to an out-group
- belief similarity: discovering a sense of common fate, shared experience and opinions
- quality desirability: believing in the superiority of the group one is member, thus upholding its norms and values
- information saliency: relying on information that is prominent and striking

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CATEGORISATION?

On the positive side (Brislin, 1981: 79-91):

- Increasing available information
- generalising new experiences
- linking one's culture with another's
- giving a sense of comfort
- developing short-term positive attitudes towards an out-group

On the negative side (Brislin, 1981: 79-91):

- ignoring discrete elements
- reinforcing stereotypes
- sustaining a particular regime of truth
- fixing social boundaries
- minimising in-group differences
- exaggerating in-group and out-group differences
- resisting change
- undermining search for alternatives

B DESCRIBING CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

Following Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey (1996: 6-7) and Brislin (1981: 85) one can describe cultural communities by means of two approaches:

EMIC

The emic approach consists in describing a community from within that is, understanding a community in the same way as its members do. One therefore studies member behaviour from within examines one culture structure to be discovered on the basis of criteria that are particular. Example: consider the use of cattle in an industrialised (Europe) and non-industrialised society (Masai). In the former cattle graze in large areas and is for meat and sale, hence an emphasis on both quality and quantity, while it can be a sign of wealth among others. In the latter it is neither primarily for meat nor for sale, hence an emphasis on quantity as it is a unique sign of wealth.

The emic approach however, despite the advantage that an insider view has, cross-cultural comparison becomes difficult since the observer must deduce the structure of the community itself.

ETIC

The etic approach is about describing a community from without, that is, understanding a community in comparison with another using predetermined characteristics. This allows the

examination of many cultural structures with universally applied a priori established criteria. Example: a dimension to classify cultures is 'Confucian work dynamism' referring to dedication, motivation and a sense of commitment to one's work and company.

But since the construction of universal criteria depends on the background of the observer, there is bias in judgement.

Thus to approach cultural communities one needs to use a combination of both approaches.

C CULTURAL VARIABILITY

OVERVIEW

Following Gudykunst and Matsumoto, 1996: 19) cultural variability consists in determining a number of variables commonly present in cultures to be subsequently used for assessing the degree of similarity and difference between cultures – etic approach.

DIMENSIONS

Following Hofstede and Andersen (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996: 21) we can distinguish between individualism vs. collectivism, high context vs. low context, high vs. low uncertainty avoidance, high vs. low power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, high vs. low immediacy & expressiveness,

D CULTURAL VARIABLES

Following Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996: 22-32, 42-44, 45-47) we have:

INDIVIDUALISM VS. COLLECTIVISM

The principle underlying the dimension 'individualism vs. collectivism' is the way people define themselves and their relationship with others. In particular:

- individualism: people look after themselves and immediate family, allegiance to many in-groups exerting little influence on behaviour, predominance of universalistic values, sphere of influence of in-groups is specific (affects one aspect one's life), priority over individual needs and goals
- collectivism: people belong to a collectivity which takes care of them, allegiance to a few in-groups exerting a strong influence on behaviour, predominance on particularistic values,

sphere of influence of in-groups is general (affects all aspects of one's life), priority over collective needs and goals

Further, cultural individualism or collectivism is affected by

- personality orientations distinguished between idiocentric, a concern with individual needs, and allocentric, a concern with the needs of the in-group
- individual values serving individual interests: self-direction (independent thought and action), stimulation (exciting life), hedonism (pleasure), achievement (personal success and ambition), power (authority and social status), or collective interests: conformity (politeness), tradition (acceptance of customs), benevolence (enhancement of other's welfare), or serving mixed interests: security (safety and social order), universalism (understanding and protection, equality), spirituality (meaning in life)
- self construals emphasising either an independent or an interdependent construal of the self

HIGH VS. LOW CONTEXTS

The principle underlying the dimension 'high-low context' is the degree to which the environment influences communication. In particular:

- high-context: meaning is transmitted from the environment rather than through the text, used mainly in collectivist cultures, indirectness of speech, sensitivity to non-verbal messages, use of ambiguous reasoning, transmission of messages inconsistent with true feelings since priority is given on in-group harmony, silence is equally communicative
- low-context: meaning is transmitted through the text rather than the environment, used mainly in individualistic cultures, directness of speech, specific and elaborate verbal messages, expression of logic and reasoning, transmission of messages consistent with one's feelings, tendency to fill in silence

HIGH VS. LOW UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

This dimension expresses the extent to which people feel uncomfortable in unstructured and unpredictable situations. On either pole we find:

- high uncertainty avoidance: low degree of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, strong desire for consensus, deviant behaviour considered unacceptable and dangerous, emotions easily displayed, resisting change, lower motivation for achievement, loyalty is a virtue, specialised careers, disapproval of competition, development of rules for every situation

- low uncertainty avoidance: high degree of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, acceptance of deviant behaviour as a curiosity, propensity for risk and change, strong motivation, critical evaluation of events and ideas

HIGH VS. LOW POWER DISTANCE

The dimension 'high-low power distance' shows the degree to which power and prestige are distributed among the members of a cultural community. We therefore have:

- high power distance: power is concentrated in the hands of a few members, is a feature of society, emphasis on coercive and referent power, acceptance of employer power, obedience of children, display of authoritarian attitudes, close supervision, counterdependence and lack of trust by subordinates, accepting orders, stress on group cohesion
- low power distance: power is equally distributed, emphasis on legitimate and expert power, preference for consultation, interdependence between employer-employee, emphasis on respect, questioning orders, egalitarian co-operation, individual initiative

MASCULINITY VS. FEMININITY

This dimension examines the degree to which feminine (or masculine) traits prevail in a cultural community. Its features include:

- masculinity: distinction between male and female roles, value placed on power and assertiveness, strong motivation for achievement, work is central to one's life, value challenge more than satisfaction with work, little contact with the opposite sex
- femininity: overlapping of male and female roles, emphasis on interpersonal relationships and concern for the weak

HIGH VS. LOW IMMEDIACY

The principle underlying the dimension 'high-low immediacy' is the degree of closeness in relationships between people. In particular:

- high immediacy: close personal distance, warmth, open expression of feelings
- low immediacy: distant behaviour, indirect expression of feelings

E EFFECTS OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Arguably, differences from one cultural community to another along the cultural variables above discussed; the overall effect is the presence of communication barriers. Specifically, there are difficulties in terms of:

- translating indexical signs: in terms of lexical, grammatical, syntactical and idiomatic equivalencies. Example: translating 'ciel mon mari' into 'sky my husband'!
- translating conceptual maps. Example: the meaning of 'democracy' varies not only from one person to another but also from one polity to another: democratic Athens was different from democratic Switzerland since in the former women had no possibility to vote
- finding experiential equivalencies. Example: having a shopping experience in Geneva is different from London
- anxiety in communication. Example: when in an unfamiliar situation not knowing how to cope with it
- assuming similarity between cultures instead of difference. Example: transferring conceptual maps and feelings from one business to another while expecting similar ways of life
- non-verbal misinterpretations. Example: western teachers tend to use note-taking as a non-verbal cue connoting interest yet this may not be carried out by some students

EFFECTS OF BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

There is the tendency to make clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them' by believing in the superiority of one's culture anchored in a strong sense of belongingness to a particular place and way of life and using discourses that represent the 'other' as inferior, Simply put, ethnocentrism and nationalism.

F DISCOURSES REPRESENTING 'US'

ETHNOCENTRISM

As an additional barrier to communication, it is the tendency to negatively judge aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture

EUROCENTRISM

Following Thrift (1997:164-168), Eurocentrism was created during the 18th and 19th centuries by placing Europe at the top echelons of a hierarchy of places and people drawing on the distinction between an 'us' as civilised and a 'them' as savage. At the same time, colonisation was used as a pretext to discover and know other people and their territories so as to construct a comparative knowledge that would demarcate Europe from the rest of the world.

This demarcation was maintained according to Hall (1997: 243) by the construction of racialised discourses structured by binary oppositions underlying biological characteristics and differences around two themes:

- civilised: white, intellectual development, refinement, knowledge, belief in reason, formal institutions and government, a restraint of emotions; all associated with culture
- savage: black, open expression of emotions, a lack of civility, sexual life, reliance on custom and ritual; all associated with nature

Therefore, according to Said (Hall, 1997: 260-261) the predominance of certain cultural forms over other; it is a form of cultural leadership that Gramsci has identified as hegemony which gave Eurocentrism its strength and collective notion of superiority in comparison with non-European peoples and cultures.

This collective notion is constructed for Anderson (Thrift, 1997: 166) through the creation of an 'imagined community'; it is imagined since one member of the community has no direct relationship with another except for the sense of belongingness.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

For Thrift (1997: 166-167) the results has been the development of national educational systems to maintain cultural cohesion, and the institutionalisation of rituals and ceremonials acting as a link among the members of a community.

NATIONALISM

I would argue however that the construction of imagined communities is not sufficient. The established cultural boundary must also become a political one. There is, in other words, a coincidence between the cultural and political units, and hence the rise of nationalism.

G NATURALISING THE OTHER

NATURALISATION

Following Hall (1997: 245), given that racialised discourses tend to ethnocentrism and nationalism, thus making clear distinctions between 'us' and 'them' by representing the 'other' as inferior by means of an official or common language, they use 'naturalisation' as a representational strategy of substituting cultural differences, which are subject to change, for natural differences, which are by nature fixed

ESSENTIALISING

Naturalisation for Hall (1997: 244-249) leads to representing the 'other' in terms of one's essential characteristics, that is, reduced and naturalised to their essence.

Therefore, this essentialist attitude leads to the use of particular conceptual classifications or types involving the reduction, exaggeration, essentialisation and naturalisation of cultural features into widely recognisable features and in consequence fixing difference. In other words, 'stereotyping' (Hall, 1997: 257-258).

H STEREOTYPING

OVERVIEW

Stereotyping is a strategy to split what is normal from what is unacceptable, thus fixing social boundaries that exclude anything that does not fit within the norm.

According to Gilman, 1997: 284) stereotypes are put together during the process of identity construction when one becomes aware of the difference between the self and the world. It is the moment when one progressively becomes aware that one cannot totally control our environment. The resulting anxiety and discomfort that needs to be combated obliges us to adjust the mental picture we have of our environment into making classifications between acceptable and unacceptable.

In other words, stereotypes arise when self-integration is threatened. They are therefore part of our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world.

It has therefore a structure (poetics) and is involved with relationships of power (politics)

THE POETICS OF STEREOTYPING

Stereotypes for Hall (1997: 263) consists of a binary structure whose opposites are an overt and conscious level: that which is made known and visible, and a suppressed and unconscious level, that which is denied and often feared of. In other words, stereotyping is grounded not only in what is real but also in fantasy.

THE POLITICS OF STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping is, following Foucault (Hall, 1997: 258-259), is a power/knowledge game that classifies and subject-positions people according to the prevailing discourses. It is, following Gramsci a site of struggle for hegemony since prevailing discourses will attempt to keep their dominant position when faced with resistance.

Example: unemployment has often been interpreted by either associating unemployment with laziness, or as being the cause of the structural weakness of an economy caused by an economic downturn. Thus, the discourse of 'indolence' has created a stereotype to explain unemployment and in consequence any unemployed worker is automatically subject-positioned as sloth regardless of the economic reality of that person. Yet this discourse may be challenged by another: the discourse of the 'victim' creating a representation of the worker as a victim of economic circumstances

OBJECTIFYING THE OTHER

For Gilman (1997: 284) since stereotypes are a crude set of mental representations of the world and desires that are discursively constructed, they perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the 'self' and the 'environment'. But since the environment is incomprehensible, it is reduced to an 'object'. It follows, that since the 'other' is part of this environment, has equally been reduced to an object (process of objectification) thus losing all the features that make up a person.

This objectification for Hall (1997: 267) leads to a representational practice known as 'fetishism', the process whereby objects are given to represent positive or negative forces, feelings, desires, fantasies or values. It involves the transfer of power and desire on the object of substitution (displacement) thus is indulged because official and widely-accepted, while at the same time such a powerful fascination is denied (disavowal) because secret, embarrassing or taboo.

According to Durkheim (Woodward, 1997: 29-30) fetish and totemic objects help order social life which is thus meaningfully structured by the tension in the opposition sacred/profane given that

objects are considered to be sacred when they have been made to embody the norms and values of a cultural community

In other words, stereotyping helps maintain a social and cultural coherence.

I EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPING

FACES OF STEREOTYPING

From the above insights stereotyping leads to

- An irrational dislike, suspicion or hatred of the 'other'
- the conscious or unconscious materialisation of power over the 'other' on the basis of race
- assuming that widely-held beliefs are true
- the reinforcement of widely-held beliefs
- the assumption that widely-held beliefs are true of any one individual

It follows that the construction and use of verbal and non-verbal racialised means of communication may spread prejudice and racism since the discourses used unconsciously subject-position individuals. In other words, individuals unconsciously identify themselves, to some extent, with these discourses.

INTERPELLATION

According to Althusser (Hall, 1996: 7, Woodward, 1997: 42) this identification takes place through an unconscious process whereby an individual is summoned to occupy the subject-position, the social role, the discourse has constructed (process of interpellation). However, following Hirst, this implies that this capacity is innate since an individual has to be able to recognise this position before it has been constructed. It follows that this capacity can only have been acquired by internalising the discourses already present in a particular language, thus its stereotypes.

BYPASSING INTERPELLATION

Interpellation explains the persistence of racialised regimes of representation. However, since meaning cannot be fixed, interpellation can be bypassed (Hall, 1997: 249, 270-275) allowing new meanings to be constructed through what Bakhtin has called the process of 'trans-coding' involving the following strategies:

- a reversal of stereotypes thus contesting the dominant discourses. Example: the rise of fundamentalist movements.
- substituting a positive imagery for negative one thus righting the balance by inverting the binary opposition of representation. Example: the use of white and black stereotypes in advertising as with the 'united colours' of Benetton.

In practice, states may seek to weaken the spread of stereotypes by

- having appropriate legislation that penalises the construction and application of prejudice
- enhancing the elaboration of oppositional discourses
- transforming prejudiced cultural norms
- giving a voice to minorities

J IDENTITY

Starting from the premise that identity is the process of constructing a sense of the self, it is the idea we have of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Formally put, I would argue that identity is a sign defined by the relationship between a signifier (name, tag) and a signified (individual, cultural community).

It follows that an identity provides us with a particular location in the world as we see ourselves to be members of a community, ethnic group, social class, gender, religion, or any other imagined cultural community. It involves constructing an identity position through representation systems, symbolically and through the exclusion of certain groups of people by marking out the different positions as not another.

K THE FORMING OF IDENTITY

Identities are formed through learning, experiencing and interacting with one's environment. It involves (Woodward, 1997: 39, 44, 45; Thomas, 1996: 197, 198; Crossley, 1996: 29-31):

SUBJECTIVITY

The discovery of oneself, the sense one has about oneself, the conscious or unconscious thoughts and emotions giving a sense of who we are, while being socially experienced through language and culture which give meaning to this experience

IDENTIFICATION

The discovery of the other, the unconscious process involving some loosening of the boundaries between self and the other to permit experiences of being aspects of the other. For Lacan it is an ongoing process that consists in the longing of and the search for the union child-mother which leads to one to identify with outside figures through the use of the symbolic systems of language.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The establishment of relationships between ourselves and the other within cultural and social constraints. It is the process of entering each other's subjectivity through empathy. For Merleau-Ponty it is the opening onto otherness, the construction of a shared space where the meaningful behaviour of one subject affects another, a process involving knowledge and understanding.

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