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Three Dimensions of Cultural Identity

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This paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding similarities and differences across cultures, by examining the three dimensions of cultural identity: human universals, group associations (national, ethnic, religious and other affiliations, including membership in multiple groups); and individual personality. Details of each of the three dimensions, and their interrelationship, are discussed, and some applications of this model to teaching intercultural communication will also be explored.

本稿は文化間の相似・相違を理解するための模範を提案する。文化的なアイデンティティの三容積（人間普遍性・グループ付属・個人性格）の三容積を紹介し、それぞれの詳細と相互関係は討論される。この模範の異文化理解・コミュニケーションの教授法のための応用も探究される。

Introduction

Cross-cultural encounters can often lead participants, especially those without a background in intercultural communication, to one of two opposite and equally erroneous conclusions, expressed succinctly by Savignon (2002, p. 167): 1) that people are all the same, or 2) that everyone is different. Each of these conclusions has some truth in it; similarities and differences do exist among all human beings. Neither, however, is absolutely true. A cursory observation of the speech, manners, dress, daily activities, and physical features of people in different cultures makes it obvious that all people are not the same. At the same time, short of an encounter with an extraterrestrial life form, it is practically impossible to conceive of a cross-cultural situation in which the participants would share no common ground whatsoever. The relevant questions for intercultural communication thus become: to what extent, and in which areas, are people the same, and in which are they different? And, how can these similarities and differences be classified, and this classification applied to teaching intercultural communication skills? The model presented here is an attempt to reconcile the two opposing points of view outlined above, and to provide a framework for illustrating to what extent each individual is similar to, and different from, others.

Drawing on the work of Hofstede (1997) and others, this model (Figure 1) divides cultural identity into three dimensions: human universals, group associations, and individual personality. Each of these dimensions will be discussed in more detail, and finally, some of the possible applications of this model to teaching intercultural communication will be explored.

Human universals

At the core of this model lie human universals, features which all human beings share with all others, regardless of differences in culture. For much of the 20th century, it was the subject of some debate among anthropologists whether universals existed or, if they did, whether they had any significance (Brown, 1991, pp. 54ff). Since the last decade of the 20th century, however, the nature and classification of universals has become a subject of considerable study, and universals offer many possible applications to the teaching of intercultural communication.

Appendix A presents a highly abbreviated list of universals presently known or widely believed to exist, drawn from several sources. Section 1 lists universal human needs arising from biological necessity. Section 2 lists fundamental human emotions, and the universally recognizable facial expressions of certain of these. Those who question the universality of these expressions often turn to Japan for a counter-example, citing the frequency with which the facial expressions of Japanese people seem to contradict their true feelings (e.g. the infamous “Japanese smile” or poker face). Ekman (1972, cited in Brown, 1991, pp. 24-26), however, demonstrated that although different cultural groups have different rules about physical expression of emotions or suppression thereof when company is present, the visible reaction to a stimulus (e.g. shock or disgust) and the

impulse to let it show were constant (as shown by monitoring the faces of participants who thought they were unobserved). More recent research (e.g. Moore et al., 1999; Matsumoto et al., 2000) also supports the idea of the universality of certain emotions and their expressions, both verbal and non-verbal.

Section 3 lists social constructs, common to all cultures everywhere, even though details may differ. While different countries and culture groups have different systems of government, for example, all have some form of government and leadership. Similarly, section 4 shows that while different groups may disagree as to what is right and what is wrong, everyone will agree that there are such things as right and wrong. Furthermore, there are certain principles which all human cultures value, or at least profess to value (Brown, 1991; Kinnier et al., 2000), including, as one example, the principle of reciprocity, in both its affirmative (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) and negative (“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”) forms.

Group associations

“Culture” is generally used to refer to group associations, particularly national or ethnic groups. As seen in Table 1, however, such groups are only part of the multiple groups of which every human being is a member, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

While many analyses of group identity divide groups into non-selected and self-selected categories, this model divides them further by the alterable or unalterable nature of non-selected groups. The groups in the first column (sex, age, race) etc. are, for the most part, biologically determined and unalterable short of rather drastic medical intervention. Those

Table 1: Types of groups

Non-selected		Self-selected
Unalterable	Alterable	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race / ethnicity • Sex • Age • Family / ancestry • Sexual orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nationality • Religion • Economic status • (Social class) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profession • Academic association • Organization membership (club, team, political party)

in the second column, however, are more flexible. Nearly everyone is born a citizen of at least one country, for example, but citizenship can be changed. Most people are born into some religious tradition (except the children of atheist or agnostic parents, in which case religion is significant by its absence; the variable has a zero or negative value but remains part of the equation), but religious conversion (or loss of faith) is far from uncommon. Economic status is also flexible. Social class is included in parentheses, as it admits change more easily in some contexts than in others; in the Hindu caste system or the British peerage, for example, social class is determined largely by accident of birth and is thus fairly rigid, whereas in North America, where social class is determined largely by education and economic status, class lines are more permeable. Self-selected groups are those chosen by the individual, such as profession, educational affiliation, or membership in a club, team, organization, or political party. As Nakamura and Collins (2004) show, people suffering from oppression or marginalization in non-selected groups (e.g. race and gender) can find empowerment by banding together into self-selected groups for mutual support.

As shown here, every human being is born a member of several groups, and will generally add more in the course of a lifetime. Various group allegiances overlap to form individual identity, and also influence each other. Sex, for example, is biologically determined; everyone is born male or female, but the cultural significance attached to this biological fact is very different in Denmark than in Afghanistan. In this case, the standards of one group (nationality) determine how membership in another group (sex) is interpreted.

The members of a group share products, practices, and perspectives (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, cited in Moran, 2001, pp. 23ff), also known as artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts (Fantini & Fantini, 1997), in common. Products (artifacts) are things made by human beings, whether tangible (buildings, clothes, works of art, etc.) or intangible (music, poetry, etc.). Practices (sociofacts) are the actions and interactions of human beings, including verbal and nonverbal communication, customs and rituals. Perspectives (mentifacts) are the thoughts, beliefs, values and attitudes that underlie the other two components. Examples of each are easy to come by in the case of national or ethnic groups, but a

microcosm of the same pattern can be observed in self-selected groups. A football team, for example, would have its own products (uniforms and equipment), practices (drills and practice routines, plays, cheers) and perspectives (belief in each other and the coach, and the common goal of winning the game). All of these form a bond among members of a group.

To paraphrase Hofstede (1997, p. 13), groups attempt to answer the questions posed by universals: groups provide means of satisfying basic needs, norms for expressing and dealing with emotions, details of social constructs, and codification of values. In other words, if universals are the elements of human behavior, groups combine them into distinct compounds. There is still one more catalyst, however, and that is the individual.

Individual personality

The individual, with unique thoughts and beliefs based on unique experiences, is the ultimate creator of cultural identity. Individuals choose self-selected groups, and also assign value to non-selected groups (positive or negative, greater or lesser). Of two citizens of the same country, for example, one may be an ardent patriot, while another tries to dissociate himself as much as possible from his national identity, perhaps preferring to see himself instead as a “citizen of the world”. Individuals also make the ultimate decision to accept or reject the perspectives (beliefs, attitudes, expectations, etc.) of their groups. The Japanese student who, in response to the assignment to write a cultural autobiography, defiantly told her teacher “I’m not like other Japanese. I’m different” (Moran, 2001, p. 98) is an example of an individual who chose to dissociate herself from the perspectives often seen as “typical” of the ethnic and national group to which she belonged, emphasizing her individual personality above group allegiance.

In addition, individuals decide to what extent each group association determines their own cultural identity. Members of minority groups, in particular, will often attribute a greater share of their individual identity to group membership. A white, heterosexual American citizen living in the U.S. is likely to define himself less in terms of race, sexual orientation or citizenship than a member of a minority group in any of these categories – although if the same person were to move to Japan, his own construct of his cultural identity might well change.

Applications to teaching intercultural communication

Recently, some models of intercultural education (particularly the *hikaku bunka* or comparative culture model often seen in Japan) have come under criticism for emphasizing differences between cultures at the expense of similarities, or for dealing exclusively with national and ethnic groups and ignoring the interrelation of other groups. As one such critic pointed out, “the classic depiction of the ‘salaryman as samurai’ as a metaphor for modern Japan does little to explain why 13-year-old Saori-chan and her friends want to wear *ganguro*-girl fashion” (Guest, 2002, p.16). The present model can help overcome this problem by focusing attention on the interplay of various groups, and away from the image of (national) culture as a monolithic entity. The model could be applied to the above example to interpret a disagreement over fashion between Saori-chan and her “salaryman” father as a cultural conflict: although the two participants share some group associations (race, nationality, family), they differ in others (generation, gender, peer group), with differences in individual preferences as well (e.g. the choice to conform to the fashion embraced by the peer group rather than the wishes of the family) and these differences illustrate the source of the conflict.

In addition, the three-dimensional model can aid in the analysis of critical incidents. An often-cited example is the maintenance or avoidance of eye contact in formal situations (again, Japanese and North Americans are often selected as a contrasting pair, but many other combinations are possible). Many intercultural training handbooks or courses would explain the difference by saying “one side believes that maintaining eye contact shows honesty, while the other believes that lowering the eyes shows respect.” As illustrated in Figure 2, however, this explanation is only satisfactory because in each case, the behavior is the manifestation of a universal: both sides would agree that honesty and respect are important; it is the norms of their groups that determine which of these is being expressed in the current situation (the individual is assumed by default to be acting according to group norms, although individuals with cross-cultural experience will often choose to override these norms in favor of an expression more suitable to the circumstances). Viewing cultural differences as ultimately resulting from differing interpretations of universals can help students understand the root causes of critical incidents.

Finally, this model shows group associations to be a usable but far from perfect predictor of behavior. For one thing, a person’s cultural identity includes so many group allegiances (nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, religion...) that no single one can be assumed to determine beliefs or behaviors completely. In addition, although the influence of groups is very real, individuals decide to what degree their attitudes and actions will be “typical” of their groups; individual experience and beliefs are the ultimate determiners of behavior.

Conclusion

Space limitations prevent a comprehensive discussion of the applications of this model to intercultural education, and readers who teach intercultural communication will undoubtedly see possibilities above and beyond those discussed here. This model is presented as a starting point for ideas in examining the composition of each person’s cultural identity, and illustrating how each person shares common traits with every other person, and at the same time, how each is unique.

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Appendix A: A Working List of Human Universals

1. Biological features

- Basic needs: food, reproduction, physical comfort, safety, movement, growth, health
- Awareness of mortality

2. Emotions

- Happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, contempt, surprise, envy, excitement, boredom, shame, guilt, love, hate
- Physical expression of some emotions (facial expressions, laughter, crying, etc.)
- Empathy

3. Social constructs

- Family, territorial, and other groups; in-group/out-group distinction
- Marriage; rules and customs governing sex
- Status and roles; division of labor
- Special occasions, rituals, rites of passage, mourning
- Trade and gift-giving
- Law, government and leadership
- Art, music, dance, poetry, games, play
- Religious and supernatural beliefs

4. Values

- Sense of right and wrong; conscience
- Justice; reciprocity – positive (Golden Rule) and negative (retaliation, redress of wrongs)
- Generosity
- Honesty (or the appearance thereof)
- Avoidance of conflict, condemnation of violence
- Commitment to something greater than the self (e.g. state, community, cause, religion)
- Self-respect, but with humility, self-discipline, and accountability
- Service to humankind; helping others
- Respect and caring for people, other living things, and environment

Sources: Brown, 1991; Kinnier et al., 2000; Malinoski, 1960 (cited in Brown, 1991, pp. 66-67); Matsumoto et al., 2000; McCrae, 2000; Moore et al., 1999

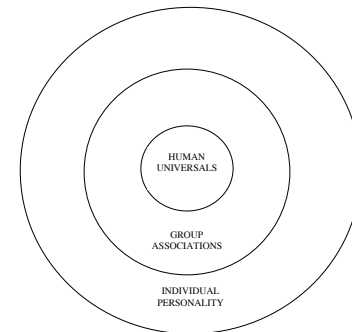


Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Cultural Identity
(Adapted from Hofstede, 1997)

	Culture 1 (e.g. North American)	Culture 2 (e.g. Japanese)
Surface behavior	Seek eye contact	Avoid eye contact
Individual	Follow own group norms (default)	Follow own group norms (default)
Group	Sustained eye contact is a sign of honesty	Lowered eyes show respect
Universal	Demonstrating honesty is important	Showing respect for others is important

Figure 2: Examination of different behaviors across cultures