Incoherent culture

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Abstract: Culture is implicitly defined in most national cultural and multi-cultural studies as coherent. Each culture is supposed to be a holistic contradiction-free pattern, creating and sustaining uniform and enduring practices. This paper, whilst acknowledging the causal (but not deterministic) influence of culture, argues that all cultures are incoherent – they contain contradictions and other forms of heterogeneity. Thus we should be hesitant about relying on uniform cultural depictions of any group – national, ethnic, gender, community, organisational or whatever else – and be open to identifying and acknowledging diversity of cultures and practices within such populations.

Keywords: cultural diversity; incoherent culture; multi-culturalism; national culture; national diversity; sub-national; values.

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1   Introduction

How are practices within individual countries sustained or changed? How does place affect practice? It is fashionable to answer these questions with a simple binary choice between an unstoppable universalising globalisation and a monolithic immovable national uniqueness. Those who chose the first insist that variations from imagined universal best ways are either irrational but eradicable residues of 'unmodernised' practices or inappropriate impositions on organisations by national governments. In contrast, the second perspective asserts that unique national practices are necessary, enduring and pervasive because they are maintained and nourished by nationally distinct

and durable institutions and/or cultures. Much cross-cultural commentary falls into the second category. Whilst both views contain some explanatory power, each suffers from a chronic lack of fit with what is happening to organisational practices. One over-privileges homogenisation, the other over-privileges national distinctiveness and continuity.

An overly deterministic notion of action has long been a bedrock of the national institutional literature (Hall and Soskice 2001, for example). Nationally uniform institutions are said to create nationally uniform practices. But that determinism is increasingly being challenged within the (neo)-institutionalist community (Crouch, 2005; Morgan et al., 2005; Streek and Thelen, 2005 for instance) and by others (Smith et al., 2008). The national cultural/cross-cultural literature has also been dominated by determinism. It is also time, I suggest, for the cultural literature to reject the 'fallacious assumption of cultural homogeneity within nations' [Tung, (2008), p.41]. That revision would not require denial that culture can be causal nor would it disregard cultural differences but it would acknowledge the significance of cultural diversity and change within countries.

2   Coherent culture

The notion of enduring nationally uniform practices created and sustained by a nationally distinct culture relies on a number of problematic moves including the exclusion of any independent roles for other cultural influences and for non-cultural influences. Here I focus solely on just one foundation: the idea that cultures are coherent. Unless cultural coherence is assumed, nationally uniform practices cannot logically be supposed to be the consequence of national culture. The national culturalist literature in management lies at the extreme end of the coherence-incoherence spectrum. I argue that coherence is an implausible depiction of culture.

In addition to the idea of national culture as coherent, there is an extensive literature on organisational culture which asserts that an organisation's culture or cultures, is, are, should or can be made coherent (see Martin, 2002 for an overview). The notion of multi-culturalism[1], whether used as a depiction of organisational or community populations, segments its focus populations into groups ('ethnic', 'class', 'gender', 'sexuality', 'class-gender' and so forth) each supposedly characterised by a unique and uniformly shared coherent culture.[2] Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2005), for instance, includes two chapters on ethnic cultures in South Africa and the USA. Each ethnic group (eight in South Africa, including Xhosa, Zulu, Tsonga and English) and five in the USA (White/Caucasian, Black/African, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander) are supposed to have its own distinct culture. The source of the authors' generalisations about the ethnic cultures of South Africa is not disclosed and the US source is highly problematic, nor do they address the implications of within-country ethnic differentiation for their attribution of power to a nationally moulding national culture. Some reactions to supposedly adverse consequences of policies founded on multi-cultural notions – such as calls that all citizens in a country should commit themselves to what are asserted to be enduring and unique national values – also rest on and reinforce, the myth of coherent culture (Joppke and Morawska, 2003).[3]

If culture is treated as causal, uniform and enduring practice can logically be deduced only if culture is conceptualised not just as determinate but also as coherent, that is, as

uniform, integrated, holistic: having a systematic logic, being a perfectly woven web with no internal contradictions, inconsistencies, ambivalences, variations, diversity, flexibility, loose ends, loopholes or gaps. Even if culture is defined as determinate, but as incoherent, as internally diverse, that is, as perhaps containing some patterns – but overall as a loose assemblage – constant and distinctive consequences cannot be implied (Archer, 1988; Smelser, 1992).

3   Untenable notion

Commitment to coherence is challengeable on many grounds. The list discussed below is not exhaustive, but it is sufficient, I suggest, to indicate that cultural coherence is an untenable notion.

First, national, organisational, community actors are embedded in and interact with many cultures. If culture is assumed to be active, then actors are constituted just by a single culture but by a host of cultures. Even if each of the cultures is conceived of as internally coherent, why should a similar assumption hold for combinations of cultures? Why should it be supposed that there be no contradictions, gaps, frictions or ambivalences in the cultural 'interfaces' within organisations or elsewhere?

Secondly, if culture is seen as an object of empirical study rather than, in large part, a construct, the conceptualisation of culture as coherent is at odds with the evidence. Any systematic effort to depict a culture within any social space will, unless it is driven by confirmatory bias (Sloman, 2005), find significant incoherence: incompleteness, illogicality, gaps, cracks, hybridity, remixing, contradictions, ambiguity, slippages, conflicts, malleability and incompatibilities. Whether incoherence is regarded as inherent in cultural phenomena (Alvesson, 2002) or co-existing with 'integration' and 'differentiation' (Martin et al., 2006), coherence is at most a characteristic of part not the 'whole' of a culture.

Thirdly, cultural coherence allows no gaps or ambiguities for individuals to engage with or exploit. It is a theory of cultural automatons. An incoherent notion of culture recognises cultural incompleteness, is open to the roles of other cultural and non-cultural influences and capable of acknowledging the capacity of individuals to exercise agency. Individuals, as Wrong (1961, p.191) puts in, are 'social but not entirely socialised'.

Fourthly, cultural coherence requires that individuals' entire mental states: values, preferences, desires, goals, needs, norms, traits, aversions, tastes, assumptions and attractions are each coherent internally *and* in relation to each other. Implausible, to say the least and contradicted by extensive research findings (Hechter, 1992; Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004).

Fifthly, within a coherent notion of culture endogenous change is inconceivable – change can only be created through exogenous shock. As Margaret Archer states: 'the net effect of this insistence on cultural compactness [is to preclude] any theory of cultural development springing from internal dynamics... internal dynamics are surrendered to external ones' (1988, p.6).

4   Abandoned by anthropology

The notion of coherent culture was once popular in anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, put forward an archipelago image of the world made up of 'peoples' each with a radically different 'culture' like a string of separate islands [in Wright, (1998), p.13]. Pitrim Sorokin (1937) and Gregory Bateson (1973), argued that each culture has a single leitmotif or ethos. There was, however, always opposition to the idea of cultural coherence within anthropology. As Bronislaw Malinowski stated: 'human cultural reality is not a consistent or logical scheme, but rather a seething mixture of conflicting principles' (1926, p.121). Clifford Geertz, in harmony with what had become and overwhelmingly still is, the accepted view in anthropology (Bock, 1999) dismisses the coherence view which he ridicules as a: 'seamless superorganic unit within whose collective embrace the individual simply disappears into a cloud of mystic harmony' (1965, p.145) and argues that to treat culture as coherent is 'to pretend a science that does not exist and imagine a reality that cannot be found' (1973, p.20).

5   Diversity

In every area of social action (however small in terms of population or geographical territory) there is evidence of diversity. Take the example of homicide. Rates vary not only between countries (and over time), but also within them. They differ immensely across locations, socio-economic, gender and ethnic groups. Within the USA for example, in 2003 the annual homicide rates per 100,000 of the population in the states of Louisiana and Maryland were 13.0 and 9.5 respectively – but the rates were only 1.2 and 1.3 in Maine and South Dakota respectively. In the period 1999–2001 the average homicides rates were more than five times greater in Washington DC than in San Francisco. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) found that among white men, homicide in response to insults occurs at rates several times higher in the southern US states than in the northern states. Sub-national analysis based on social rather than geographical heterogeneity also demonstrates the information poverty of national-average statistics. For example, in the USA in 2002 blacks were seven times more likely to commit homicide and were six times more likely to be victims of homicide than whites. In the same year and in the same country, it was men and not women who committed 91% of gun homicides; 80% of arson homicides and 63% of poison homicides (Gaines and Kappeler, 2003).

The search for uniformities within countries is a worthy scholarly activity but in conducting such research we should not ignore diversity. Openness to multiple levels, a variety of points of influence and diverse characteristics is required. Cultures are not monoliths. An acknowledgement of internal divisions, gaps and ambiguities inserts the possibility of critical interpretation by agents and thus of action variation, hybridisation, remaking and unpredictability (McSweeney et al., 2008).

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Notes

1   For criticisms of the notion that each 'ethnic' group has a unique culture see Allport (1924), Brubaker (2002), Higham (1993) and Sen (2006) for instance.

2   Acknowledgement and criticisms of differential access to material or symbolic capital by different national sub-groups does not have to be predicated on acceptance of the notion of that each group has a unique, collectively shared and coherent culture.

3   Group identity by others or by self does not require a common culture.