MEANINGS OF THE NOTION OF CULTURE IN INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: There are many meanings given to the notion of culture. Various contents related to it are delimited according to the specialty field or the investigated area. Moreover, the overlapping or distinction between culture and civilization also occurs. An inventory and an analysis of the aforementioned aspects could be a subject for exhaustive research. We are not aiming at such an approach, our intention is to analyze the philosophies circumscribed to this concept in some of the most important investigations carried out in the field of intercultural management so as to distinguish in a very precise manner the sense given and to focus on the elements that allow us to build a definition with an operational content in this area of research. For this purpose, we also identify the perspectives that allowed us to develop a functionalist-instrumental pragmatic approach.

Keywords: culture, intercultural research, cultural determinism, acculturation

JEL Codes: Z19

1. PERSPECTIVES ON THE NOTION OF CULTURE

1.1. The functionalist perspective on culture

In their intercultural studies, researchers Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner emphasize the traditional functionalist epistemological perspective on culture that highlights cultural determinism which originates in Bronislaw Malinowski’s conception who believes that (Cuche, 2003:56; Bonte, Izard, 2007:399; Geraud et al., 2001:91):

- cultural facts are universal and acquired;
- each culture is a coherent whole: all the elements of a cultural system harmoniously complete each other, hence the equilibrium and functionality of

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each system; this explains the fact that each culture tends to preserve its specific identity;

- any culture has to be analyzed from a synchronous perspective, starting from the mere observation of its contemporary data;
- the interdependence of social facts is an expression of their functional necessity, hence the importance given to context;
- the constitutive elements of a culture fulfill the function of satisfying man’s basic needs; by founding “institutions” that establish common solutions and transmit them, culture becomes the functional answer to human needs (hence the utilitarian aspect).

Although Hall’s and Hofstede’s constructions are in line with this general approach, yet paying particular importance to history (at least at the level of explaining certain forms of culture), each has a particular conception that we will further present.

The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall sees culture as a communication system. He proposes a definition of culture with biological and physiological roots. Culture is not a choice, but a set of choices that originate in the biological past. Man cannot escape his own culture for it dictates his behavior in an unconscious manner. Culture is communication and communication is culture. Culture is rather regarded through messages than structures and control systems. The world of communication is subdivided into an emergent part, i.e. that of words and into an emergent part which is also more important, i.e. that of “silent” language. Having a hidden sense, culture must be decoded in time, space and cultural context and this is only possible through a comparison between cultures. In the author’s opinion, culture is resistant to rapid exogenous change (Hall, 1984:219-220; Hall, 1992:14-20).

Geert Hofstede (1996:19-26), partisan of the same perspective founded on the suppositions of determinism and cultural convergence, understands by (secondary59) culture, the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of a group from the members of another. The author acknowledges the limited character of the definition but he argues that he wanted it to be operational as far as his purpose was concerned, i.e. that of highlighting value systems.

Hofstede also illustrates the levels of culture manifestation: the first level has values in its centre, while the second one includes rituals, heroes and symbols (resumed under the term of practices – identified through external observation, even if the cultural sense given to them is invisible). Regional, ethnic and religious cultures can be described in the same terms as national cultures.

59 Primary culture, also called „culture in a narrow sense”, refers to „civilization” or „refinement of the mind” and to the results of this refinement such as education, art and literature in particular (Hofstede, 1996:20-21).
The ways of thought, feeling and action are often interiorized by the individual through unconscious learning. The culture thus acquired is also projected in the working environment.

We observe that from the definitions and explanations provided by Hofstede and Hall, no pragmatic sense to indicate the possibility of exploiting cultural differences in management results, an aspect followed by us in this research. In his studies, Hofstede rather suggests a negotiation which involves a compromise position.

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (2004) approach culture instrumentally, envisaging it as a set of universes that can be reconciled. They give a deep pragmatic functionalist sense to culture: culture stands for the answers found by individuals to the problems they are confronted with (Falk-Bánó, 2002). Thus the final solutions for the problems raised by individuals are given by culture. They often make the distinction between survival and destruction. Culture also distinguished between what an individual can do and what he cannot.

The authors mentioned consider that human intelligence consists in the skill of conceiving two opposite ideas at the same time (reconciliating values, harmonizing a priori opposite values), preserving the society’s operational capacity, yet allowing individuals from different cultures to create wealth by positively exploiting the differences between them. The answers given by cultures to issues they are confronting with are part of a circular movement in which thought gradually privileges a valuable universe and its opposite because no value is “normal” in itself since it only corresponds to a particular initial choice. The access to various answers involves the exit from one’s own culture which gives the possibility to come up with better solutions. Thus, a good knowledge of cultures is an advantage especially by combining the solutions given by opposite cultures (Hampden-Turner, Trompenaars, 2004: XXI-XXXIV). This instrumental construction responds not only to the ideas of cultural relativism and acculturation, but also offers the solution of valuing cultural differences. We consider that it is closer to the aims of intercultural management.

1.2. The perspective of interpretive anthropology

Another acceptance of the notion of culture originates in the perspective of interpretive anthropology. Marshall Sahlins, one of its representatives, insists on the arbitrary aspect of cultural phenomena that are by no means an answer to natural phenomena, but a symbolic perception of the world, including nature “as nature is for culture what the constituted is for the constituent. Culture is not only nature expressed under a different shape. On the contrary, the action of nature develops in terms of culture, that is under a shape that does no longer belong to it, but is realized as signification” (Cuche, 2003:91). From this perspective, cultural phenomena are arbitrary and cannot provide answers to natural phenomena, they can only perceive the world and nature
symbolically. Hence the stresses on cultural diversity through which cultures are seen as unique ways of giving a sense to the world. Strengthening this conception, Claude Levi-Strauss sees in culture any “ethnographical set that, from the viewpoint of the survey, is significantly different when compared to others”. According to him, culture may be presented as a set of representations and practices ordered symbolically (Cuche, 2003:92; Geraud et al. 2001:93; Bonte, Izard, 2007:331). Clifford Geertz, a representative of symbolic anthropology, goes even further as he reconsiders symbolic forms and their interpretation not as structure as Sahlin and Levi-Strauss did, but as “stylistics”, an active that builds sense: “The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. This is the explanation I seek...” (Bâlătescu, 2004:18-19). For him, culture is “a historically transmitted system of significances embodied in symbols and concepts inherited and expressed in symbolic forms based on which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life” (Dupriez, Simons, 2000:33; Burduș, 2006:83).

Culture is more of an object built than an empirical reality. Some of its rules are explicitly stated as normative, prescriptive, yet culture is also what we unconsciously do. The cultural fact is mainly unconscious because it is fully internalized, incorporated and it cannot be precisely designed as culture. Hence the deduction that what happens at the level of the unconscious is not seen as culturally determined, although it is a part of culture (as action that gives sense). In our opinion, this is a limit as psychologists proved that this is the level of expression for the elements of cultural specificity. We consider that the functioning of culture cannot be compared to a programme as individuals possess cultural categories for formulating original statements that give sense to particular experiences (Geraud, s.a., 2001:94).

Departing from these reasonings, Philip d'Iribarne approaches culture as a system of sense-making corresponding to a hybrid theoretical vision of the discipline: associating ethnography with an interpretation model that gives answers to the history of political cultures and the systems of social organizations. The analysis consists in “balancing the actors’ strategies against the sense they give to the situations they are found in and the acts they are likely to accompany” and “conceive culture as a universe of uniform practices so as to understand it as a set of codes in which the diversity of practices acquires sense” (Sousi, Cote, 2006:130-136; Lafayette, 1998:75).

Therefore, culture is an interpreting process by which the individual gives significance to his own reality departing from a referential sense. He shares this system of senses with other members of the community because he elaborates these systems of
senses along history. The individual is not determined in his behaviours and values that belong to his own personality and history but his reactions to a given situation or action will be according to his interpretations, i.e. with these systems of senses.

Referential systems that organize the forms of social links are also present in working situations. Crossing the historical path, political culture is also integrated in this set. Universal logic is of no interest to us, we are only concerned with the permanent local logic that expresses itself through the global practices that operate within a society.

This perspective on culture is closer to the sense of harmonizing managerial practices with local situations, emphasizing diversity, yet it risks to be treated as superficial by underestimating the determinant role of culture. Furthermore, even though in theory, it gives much more freedom to the individual, it does not suggest anything as far as the manner of transmitting national traditions with the possibility to value sense differences is concerned.

1.3. A dualist perspective on culture

The conception of Melville Herskovits, another representative of anthropology, could reconcile the two ways of approach presented above, one taking into account the strong determinant character of culture, the other regarding culture as a construct of senses. The solution provided is to envisage culture as an objective reality and remember that the phenomena studied are built by the anthropologist, hence the lack of existence in themselves (Geraud et al., 2001:151). His theory is completed by the reinterpretation principle: the process through which old significances are given new elements or by which new values modify the cultural significance of old forms” (Geraud et al., 2001:104). This principle provides a theoretical foundation to what we understand by acculturation, a process that is closely related to the valuing of cultural differences.

2. DEFINITION OF CULTURE IN INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH

2.1. „Culture” in a pragmatic sense

Starting from Herskovits’s ideas and taking into account the practical character of intercultural research, we consider the following definition of culture to be a proper one:

Culture is that supraorganic entity that slowly evolves in normal conditions, acquired and transmitted especially based on tacit learning and which creates a more or less performing and unitary framework for the existence and functioning of the members of the group, which can be ameliorated in cultural contact situations.

We mention the fact that it makes reference to what is understood by culture in the field of intercultural research without being exhaustive. Moreover, the pragmatic sense given comes to support this particular approach.
2.2. Features of culture

The following features result from the definition presented above:

- **supraorganic entity**\(^{61}\): culture exists beyond human-individual limits; individuals are born within it and are transformed by a pre-existing culture that continues to exist after their death;
- culture *is learned, it is not* genetically inheritable; cultural elements\(^{62}\) are transmitted and learned at a *tacit* level, in the process of socialization;
- **acculturation – the dynamic dimension of culture**: a) no culture exists in “pure” state, without any external influences; however *evolution is slow* without any intervention;
  
b) cultures are sources or “knowledge reservoirs”: individuals can acquire elements from other cultures, for the purpose of improving their performances by *cultural contact*;
- **existential and functional framework**: in a large sense, culture gives the existential and functional framework of a group, helping it to solve its problems according to the specific means it possesses;
- **collective phenomenon** – culture is accepted and learned by a group of people that live in a specific social environment (country, region, etc.).

In the analysis of this definition, we point some issues to avoid confusion:

1. *How could something external and supraorganic be learned through tacit knowledge?* As Herskovitz claimed, culture does not have an objective existence, so we cannot speak of an organicist approach because there is no substantial identity between society and individuals. However, the whole, that is society, benefits from an ontological and explanatory primate on the parts. Therefore, what “circulates” in society is felt and interiorized as individuals are parts of it.

2. *Does the learning process comprise answers only given to the “biological”?* Although it is based on the supraorganic conception, our approach does not fully correspond to the functionalist model. This is because we do not consider that culture only meets the needs that send to the biological, natural (not even quoted researchers that carried out intercultural studies shared this vision). We consider that individuals need to give symbolic senses to faith acts, phenomena, etc., meanings that are transmitted to them in the same manner.

\(^{61}\) Herskovits (Geraud et al., 2001:151) does not contest its utility as if it had an objective existence because there is no other way for us to understand the diversity of the types of human behavior; but this is just a “construct” used as guide for thought and support in analysis.

\(^{62}\) We refer to those cultural elements corresponding to the *informal level* described by Edward T. Hall.
3. Is cultural transmission unidirectional? The parts can send “signals” to the whole only that in normal conditions, signals are weak and can slowly generate change. For a rapid change, actions in its favour must be felt at the level of the entire “body” (i.e. if a reduced number of individuals change their attitudes, the manner of thinking, feeling, etc. it does not mean that they have the capacity to change the overall culture of society) and imply an active participating attitude of the individuals.

4. How can the culture of a group change within one society? The contact with other cultures is the most efficient and quick way to cultural learning. Moreover, specific training programmes can support this type of change.

5. Do all individuals share the same values? No, because there is no single ontological explanatory “body”. There are several “bodies” corresponding to different levels of culture (be it national, regional/ethnical/religious, sectorial, professional or organizational, etc.), with more than one “brain” to master the individual. These levels may harmoniously or conflictually overlap. The more conflictual are the values, the higher the tensions that will lead to the desire of change. Although individuals acquire different values through the contact with certain levels of culture, they also acquire a ground specific to national culture.

6. How can group performance be ameliorated? At the level of culture, group performance can be ameliorated by valuing cultural differences.

2.3. Interferences

By adopting the definition proposed, we interfere with another sense given to culture that is closer to what intercultural management aims at, that is to put into play cultural differences: culture is what gives intelligence the capacity to grow (Henri-Irenée Marrou, apud Zaït, 2006:42). In this acception, the pragmatic dimension of culture is foreseen with an influence on management efficacy and efficiency. Culture is what constitutes the “framework”. What happens within this framework depends on the manager’s capacity to exploit it. Different managers reach different results with the same “ingredients”. Hence the conclusion that the manager has to take responsibility for rendering cultural specificity valuable. He can do this by employing a specific philosophy and an intelligent creation and development policy for organizational culture.

The capacity to grow refers to the capacity to create or adapt solutions, i.e. to solve any problem that the individual is confronted with, be it biological, moral or spiritual. According to the culture involved, the answer provided can send to more or less efficient or profitable actions which means that individuals from various cultures can learn from each other, having the possibility to review a “portfolio” of solutions and choose the proper one according to context (this is what Hampden-Turners and Trompenaars understand by reconciliation).
3. Consequences and Conclusions

For organization management, cultural specificity and intercultural approach are not interesting as such. What is important is what can be achieved through what individuals have as acquisitions, by anticipating their behaviours, mentalities, attitudes and positions towards action. In fact, the research in the field of intercultural management was carried out at the management’s “order” as a result of the manager’s objective need to know his framework of action so as to exploit it.

The way adopted by us preserves instrumental vocation, aiming at a profitable approach for organizations: on the one hand, the knowledge of the individuals’ cultures that come in contact leads to positive effects through cultural synergy and culture can be ameliorated in contact situations through acculturation, on the other hand.

In a wide sense, acculturation refers to the phenomenon that results from direct and continuous contact between groups of individuals from various cultures, with changes of the original cultural types of one or both of the groups – if we have in view two cultures (Geraud et al., 2001:103; Ferréol, Jucquois, 2005:11). Thus, acculturation can be unidirectional or bidirectional. Our purpose here is not to examine the issues related to power rapportso although they occur because this is not the aim of acculturation for intercultural management. Furthermore, this process would be accepted, made aware of and carried out with the effort of the persons involved. They do not only have to understand another cultural specificity, but also adopt it and this involves a certain amount of rationality. The acculturation occurring at random is one thing while the process organized for a specific purpose (and which should be known by those involved) is another. In the latter case, individuals are much more aware of what happens. It is true that the hidden senses of culture, harder to understand and decode, will be transmitted in an implicit manner, yet they will make a conscious effort to learn and assimilate in an explicit manner many cultural elements. Furthermore, they will try to remain in control, avoiding situations that could generate tensions based on their intercultural knowledge (assuming that individuals will not face intercultural situations without a preliminary training and the personal observations on behaviours, attitudes and positions towards actions adopted by those from another culture. Later on, they will have to be capable to “migrate” from a solution to another according to the situation in question. In the sense described above, acculturation does not trigger the change of the internal logic of the receiving culture/cultures; therefore it is possible for some solutions not to be taken over as such and only for adaptation to be possible.

From this perspective, the purpose of intercultural management is to identify and analyze elements of cultural specificity, make recommendations and give solutions to exploit cultural differences. In this way, new paths to build competitive advantages are
open to the manager that operates in cultural environments or works with persons from various cultures.

REFERENCES


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63 The prefix “a” comes from the Latin “ad” that indicates an action of proximity (Cuche, 2003, p. 82)