

## **Carrying Cultural Baggage: the contribution of socio-cultural anthropology to cross-cultural coaching**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the cultural awareness of professionals working in organisations. Given the multicultural nature of today's workforce, it is becoming increasingly important for companies and coaches alike to take into account how cross-cultural differences may affect daily working practices. The study draws on a review of current research into cultural dimensions and looks at the complex relationship between personality and culture – our '*cultural baggage*'. In order to explore the opinions and cultural awareness of participants, a questionnaire was developed. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify themes and orientations to cross-cultural issues in terms not only of communalities but also of paradoxes. The results highlighted a high level of recognition of cultural dilemmas and a perceived need and willingness to address and reconcile them. However, the diversity of opinions about the potential benefits of specific methods of addressing cultural dilemmas suggested considerable uncertainty about dealing with cross cultural issues.

**Key Words:** Cross-cultural, cultural baggage, cultural dimensions, coaching, mentoring, socio-cultural anthropology

### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to report on the results of a study designed to explore the emerging discipline of cross-cultural coaching (Rosinski 2003) and to establish the levels of awareness about, and attitudes to cross-cultural issues; the patterns and/or relationships between awareness, attitudes and cultural dimensions among businesses and business consultants, coaches, mentors and coaching/mentoring organisations.

I began this study from the perspective that while there has been some research into mentoring and coaching, there appeared to be little that focussed specifically on cross-cultural influences. In my review of the available literature, it became increasingly clear that the integration of a cultural perspective into coaching was very much at the 'pioneering' stage. The main aims of this study were to try and establish levels of awareness about, and attitudes to cross-cultural issues; and to study the patterns and/or relationships between awareness, attitudes and the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner among businesses and business consultants, and coaching organisations.

Cross-cultural coaching addresses the way in which cultural differences affect the daily lives of people, and raises awareness of cultural differences and the effect they can have on the process of managing others and doing business in general. In today's global economy organisations understand that to sustain successful and resilient businesses and to keep their competitive edge, they must develop employees who understand their global business, and employ people with global skills.

Rosinski (2003) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) have developed pioneering work in cross-cultural competencies and coaching methods. At a fundamental level, their

work has been based on the works of socio-cultural anthropologists Hofstede (1980) and Schwartz (1994). Their contribution in overcoming cultural miscommunication, tension and conflict, including the perils of stereotyping and 'mono-culturalism', has helped to formulate and explore the hypothesis of this study.

### **Cultural baggage: a by-product of cultural systems**

Socio-anthropological thinking is based on the premise that all humans are born with the same basic physical characteristics, but depending on where they grow up, each individual is exposed to different climates, foods, languages, religious beliefs etc. Therefore, '*are we really self-made or did our parents, teachers, families and friends have a hand in it?*' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997, p.54). Thus, one could argue that the socio-anthropological perspective on culture takes a holistic view, describing culture as a pattern of learned and shared behaviours of people and/or groups consisting of belief systems and languages; and of social relationships be they personal, organisational, or institutional. (Hall, 1963; Hall and Hall, 1987; Hofstede, 1980; Kondo, 1990; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Schwartz, 1994). Therefore, at a fundamental level, it could be argued that culture is a representation of a complete way of life of a people who share the same attitudes, values and practices.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p.7) makes the distinction of 'identity' by using snowflakes as a metaphor: "They look identical as they fall, but taking a closer look, we soon discover that they are not identical". Hence, he argues, rather than seeing identity as a single unitary self, perhaps cultural identity should be viewed as being multi-faceted, i.e. acknowledging that people have a number of selves or identities depending on context and setting. For example, the biggest barrier individuals and/or employees encounter is not necessarily that they come from different parts of the world, or that they speak a different language or even occupy a different physical space, it is the baggage they carry in their own cultural suitcases which needs to be explored.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner maintain that what people expect depends on where they come from, and the meanings they give to what they have or are experiencing. They argue that "*expectations occur on many different levels, from concrete, explicit level to implicit and subconscious ones*" (1997, p. 21). Furthermore, they describe culture as consisting of various layers:

*...The outer layers are the products and artefacts that symbolise the deeper, more basic values and assumptions about life. The different layers are not independent from one another, but are complementary [...]. The shared meanings that are the core of the culture are man-made; are incorporated into people within a culture yet transcend the people in culture.*

(1997, p. 27)

### **Cross-cultural dilemmas**

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner argue that "*Every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems which reveal themselves as dilemmas*" (p. 8); to this end, they have incorporated best management theories into their own analysis of the task of managing across cultures. These theories were realized by using a participant questionnaire profiler, which was based on their Seven Dimensions of Culture model and by incorporating Trompenaars and Wooliams framework for managing change across cultures.

Similarly, Rosinski points out the dangers of our assumptions and beliefs systems when working with coachees from varying origins and backgrounds. He argues that by providing a framework for integrating coaching and cultural perspectives, i.e. examining numerous

cultural orientations, styles and approaches to coaching, the development of a cross-cultural mindset will be facilitated. For example, he writes:

Our identity could be viewed as this personal and dynamic synthesis of multiple cultures. Our behaviour will typically vary depending on the group we happen to be associated with [...]. The fact that our behaviours depend in part on the particular cultural context further justifies the need for coaches to integrate the cultural perspective into their practice. In some cases the obstacle to someone's progress may be cultural rather than psychological, thus calling for a different coaching dialogue. (p. 1)

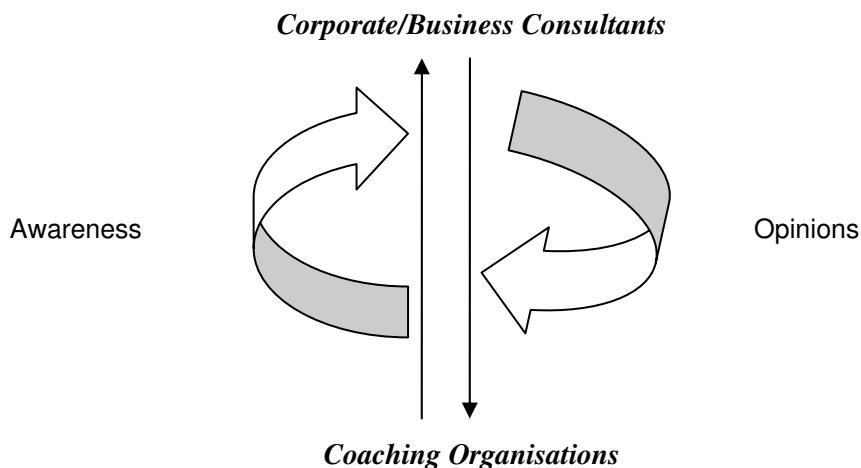
Furthermore, he maintains that cultural awareness is more than just realizing another culture is different from our own; it is also about learning to value that other culture. He argues that culture is behind our behaviour, and often without our realization. It can influence how close we stand, how loud we speak, how we deal with conflict and as a result, by failing to understand how culture impacts our needs and preferences, culture can often lead us to misinterpret behaviour.

### **Methodology**

As the research was exploratory, I focussed the design on two main aspects: the initial review of literature which drew on a broad array of coaching and socio-anthropological theories and studies, and the less extensive, but nevertheless in-depth cross-cultural coaching work of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), and Rosinski (2003). In turn, this provided the basis for the primary research, which took the form of a questionnaire which was sent to a small expert survey sample to identify cross-cultural themes and patterns.

To ensure that survey participants had some recognizable expertise on the subject under investigation, I adopted the model in (Fig. 1) below. On the one hand, I was attempting to quantify levels of awareness of cross-cultural issues, as well as to explore the accompanying opinions, beliefs and assumptions, and how they relate to the dimensions of culture. I was also trying to make sure that the survey respondents would have an interest in this particular area of study.

**Fig.1 Survey Sample and Questionnaire Model**



The survey sample was not only limited in size, but also in terms of the geographical make-up of the participants, who were mostly from the U.K. with the rest from continental Europe. By

extension it would be difficult to generalise from the results, however, this was not the intention of the study. While gender could also be a factor which might influence attitudes and responses, the exploratory nature of the study precluded it from being a controlled variable at this point, although this issue could form the basis for further research.

The purpose of the initial questionnaire was to elicit the opinions of the survey participants in order to identify themes and orientations to cross-cultural issues, in terms of communality as well as potential paradoxes. It was also intended to see how these opinions and orientations fitted with responses to questions about the various cultural dimensions identified and developed by Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. The questionnaire was therefore divided into two parts. The first section addressed the opinions about attitudes, values and behaviours pertaining to culture in general, cultural dilemmas and, to cross-cultural coaching and training specifically. I also decided to use a number of similar questions to check for inconsistencies in responses, which might indicate either a paradox in terms of opinions, possibly a conflict between a 'norm' and a given individual's personal view, or could reflect a lack of appreciation for, or indeed indifference to, a given issue. The second section of the questionnaire was constructed on the basis of Hofstede's and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's cultural dimensions, and sought to elicit culture-specific values, beliefs and assumptions which could influence cross-cultural interaction within a professional environment.

### **Results, discussions and recommendations**

In analyzing the responses to the questionnaire, it was evident that there was a high level of recognition of the importance of cross-cultural issues, and the need to address and reconcile them. However it was very difficult to define or quantify levels of cultural awareness, which was to some extent unsurprising given the complexity of the issues involved. But as I outlined in the methodology, a major objective was also to explore the quality of awareness and understanding of cultural dilemmas and dimensions. In this respect, the first section of the questionnaire (on attitudes to culture and potential cross-cultural training solutions) was very instructive in terms of perceptions about the relationship between culture and personality. In my opinion, the most notable contrast was that there was considerably greater agreement that culture shapes the personality and a lot more uncertainty about how the individual shapes culture. This impression was further reinforced by the general agreement that managers from different cultures do not necessarily find it easy to adapt their behaviour to fit the different needs of another culture. From a coaching perspective, it suggests some attention needs to be paid to how an individual perceives and relates to his/her culture. For example, there is a clear difference between seeing culture as providing a framework for social interaction, which is constantly evolving, and on the other hand perceiving culture as providing a set of social constraints. In either case, there may be some elements of our culture, which at an individual level are considered to be important in our everyday lives, while there are others which may be difficult to accept, which could be sources of tension with other members of our culture. Given that such perceptions may be operating partly at a subconscious level, this may not be easy to establish. But they appear to me to be a significant element in the process of gaining a better understanding of our cultural baggage, i.e. in how we synthesize the myriad of cultural groupings to which we are exposed on a daily basis.

There was greater diversity of opinion about the benefits of specific cross-cultural training solutions, and when, where and how they might be applied. The initial conclusion that can be drawn is this shows that the process of integrating the cross-cultural domain into both business and coaching practice is still at an early stage of development.

As far as improving the general awareness and understanding of the benefits of cross-cultural training, three sets of responses in the first section seem to me to define some of the issues that need to be addressed. Firstly the fact that half of the respondents believed that cultural issues within organisations are dealt with only if they relate to behavioural issues is indicative of a certain level of resistance to dealing with these issues, which may be due to an appreciation of the complexity of such issues. On the other hand, if cultural issues in some organisations are only addressed when there is a behavioural conflict, then this will tend to cast them in a negative light. Hence it does lead to the conclusion that some organisations are not sufficiently aware that ignoring and playing down cultural differences, as well as evaluating them negatively, is a major contributor to miscommunication, misunderstanding and conflict. Secondly, while coaches largely agreed that business managers recognise that diversity training should now include cross-cultural training for employees sent on global assignments, the business organisation responses were much divided. This leads me to conclude that some businesses are either unaware, or possibly not persuaded of the benefits of this specific approach. Nevertheless this set of responses, and the fact that none of the respondents disagreed that incorporating the dilemmas deriving from the differences in cultural dimensions help organisations to integrate their cultural orientations suggests that the key area of uncertainty among businesses and coaches is the method and/or models of integrating cultural dilemmas. The point that this suggests to me is, that before any attempt is made to develop the skills necessary to negotiate the differences between cultures, a greater awareness of how we negotiate difference in our own culture is required. This is to say we need to be more consciously and self-critically aware of the assumptions that underlie our habitual responses and modes of interaction, in other words our cultural baggage. In principal this is already the main focus of traditional coaching and mentoring. But I believe considerably more research needs to be conducted into how these methods and skills can be developed to take account of and integrate cross-cultural issues and dilemmas.

#### ***From national to cross-cultural perspectives***

Cross-cultural research has largely focused on national differences because it is much easier to establish a person's nationality, than to identify him/her as belonging to another type of cultural grouping, be that regional, professional, political, economic or social. The most frequently cited reason is that a given individual will be a member of numerous forms of so-called sub-cultures or higher level cultures (e.g. European), which in effect rules them out as unique independent variables. But I believe that without exercising some control for the effect of these 'other' cultural variables, it is difficult to be sure that attributing a given behaviour, belief, value or attitude expressed by an individual to national cultural influences is theoretically or empirically valid. For example, even at a national level, there has to be particular care to acknowledge the difference between ethnically diverse nations such as Canada or Malaysia; ethnically and/or religiously divided nations such as Belgium or the former Yugoslavia, or relatively homogeneous nations such as Japan or Korea, let alone very complex national cultures such as China or India. In essence, this does nothing more than acknowledge that socio-cultural anthropology is the study of the dilemmas and problems of differences and similarities not only *between*, but also *within* societies.

In the specific context of this study, one of the most interesting aspects of the responses to the second section of the questionnaire on cultural dimensions was the differences in opinions both within and between coaches and business organisations. My original intention in including a section on cultural dimensions was to explore the relationship between these responses and those on the first section of the questionnaire. But the differences of opinions between the two sets of respondents on 'universalism vs. particularism' and 'individualism vs. communitarianism' (Fig.6) suggested to me that I had to consider whether these opinions in some way reflected values that were influenced by the differing needs and requirements of the corporate and coaching environments. I cannot conclude whether this was the key influence

on these responses. However I do think this emphasizes that it is tenuous to assume that the responses to such value dimensions questionnaires can be ascribed largely to national culture. I also believe that the way that corporate and professional culture influences our habits and values requires a great deal more in-depth research. For example, it might be interesting to establish whether there are differences in the responses to a cultural dimensions questionnaire between professional groups, e.g. doctors, police officers, computer programmers, sports professionals, etc., and how these compare to national differences. However, it also has to be acknowledged that the difficulty of drawing any definite conclusions about key influences is clearly a limitation to the use of questionnaires in general. This does suggest it would have been preferable to be able to expand and explore the data that was generated by the questionnaires via follow-up interviews. But, as discussed in the methodology, this would have required a lot more time and resources than were available to me in this study.

Nevertheless analyzing the results in relation to the problem of ignoring and playing down the importance of cultural differences also suggested that the questionnaire design needed refinement. Specifically, I was unable to deduce or make any assumptions about what level of importance each respondent attached to each of the dimensions. A system of ranking the various value dimensions is not a new concept or methodology, in that it is very similar to the two 'basic bipolar' dimensions of 'openness to change vs. conservation' and 'self-enhancement vs. self transcendence' that are incorporated as higher dimensions in the Schwartz Value Inventory (Fig. 4). But more importantly I think that more research into developing a system of ranking the value dimensions would not only help to identify those value dimensions, which may be ignored, downplayed or even negatively evaluated, but also provide a potentially very useful tool for integrating the cross-cultural dimension into traditional coaching and mentoring practices.

## Conclusion

From this specific perspective, a focus on quantifying how national cultures differ along the various value dimensions that have been identified does run some risk of contributing to the formation of cultural stereotypes, which have little or no predictive value.

This is why greater emphasis needs to be placed on understanding our own 'cultural baggage' from a coaching perspective, particularly on the dynamic processes of the way in which our own culture has, and is evolving. The building blocks of improving cultural awareness and developing cross-cultural skills therefore have much in common with the key skills associated with building rapport as a coach or mentor. For the coach or business organisation, it is therefore about understanding the processes involved with the different ways in which we negotiate social interaction, and the elements of the various models of culture. These range from the apparently simple distinction between the visible and invisible level of values (Fig.1) to the complexity of Schwartz's 'Theoretical model of relations among motivational value types and two basic bipolar value dimensions' (Fig.4). It is about raising our awareness of what is subconscious and invisible up to a conscious and visible level; and from there we can develop the skills necessary to negotiate ways of interacting with others whose values, attitudes and habits, or indeed in contexts are unfamiliar to us. I believe that if this is to be achieved, coaching and cross-cultural research needs to transcend the limitations of a focus on national culture. It needs to acknowledge that cultural identity should be viewed as being multi-faceted, and that people have a number of selves or identities depending on context and setting.

The work of Schwartz, Hofstede and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner has provided very valuable insight into the cultural dimensions, which help to identify the way in which values differ between national cultures. However, they would also be the first to acknowledge that

national cultures are in a constant state of change, and this in turn dictates the need to evolve their questionnaires, re-analyze the accompanying databases of results, and amend and redefine their models accordingly. But perhaps the key aspect for further research is to develop methods that place a greater emphasis on the processes through which culture changes. In other words how human actions and practices change, and new meanings evolve in response to changes to social contexts. By this I mean for example: the impact of increased migration (whether voluntary, or in response to political or economic factors), or the proliferation of new forms of communication like the internet, not only on working environments, but on the myriad ways in which we organize our social lives. The point being that this should help to move research and practice from a focus on more abstract concepts such as values, to the ways in which culture is produced and negotiated. Consequently, as Rosinski (2003, p. xviii) said, 'intercultural professionals will be better equipped to fulfil their commitment to extend people's worldviews, bridge cultural gaps, and enable successful work across cultures'.

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