A Sense of Culture

Cultural Anthropology in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Drs. Mariska Stevens

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Preface

Foreign or not Foreign; That is the Question!

"Chinese companies focus on too many products at the same time!" He gazed, somewhat drunk, over the top of the bar as if the far end signified how far away China is. "I know all about China," he continued," We were talking about the province of Ningxia, and I could not link his remark to our subject until he shared his reflections: 'Ah yes, Ningxia, this province in the South East of China, in Xiamen!" His eyes challenged my knowledge. I tried not to reveal my laughter. "Heavens, I always thought Ningxia was rather more North, somewhat in the middle." A slight blink of panic floated around the corners of his mouth. He started to stutter… and then in one second, a blink of an eye, he saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Relieved he took a deep breath and uttered the immortal words: "Ah, but you never know ha, with China, it would not be the first time the government would create confusion about the geography of one of their provinces" This small anecdote shows how easy it is to use a prejudice to your advantage, in this case, covering up that you do not know what the hell you are talking about.

I am not shocked anymore by these small examples revealing such massive prejudices, in this case, fantasizing about the role of the Chinese government. Research shows stereotypes are apparent in the interpretations by persons who believe a society far removed from their own in space is both awkward in time and a wonderful place to which to tell fairytales. Therefore, when I was asked by the Dutch Chinese community to give a speech on the Dam in Amsterdam in 2008 for the Olympics in China, I wholeheartedly accepted the invitation. It was the first time in Dutch history that almost 2000 Chinese protested against the political judgments dominating the preparations of this international sports event. I was touched by the serious attempt of the Chinese-Dutch people towards fraternization.

Many foreign companies, as well as foreigners, students operating, working, or studying, living in cultures different from their own, fail to see that their problems come from the fact that they are FOREIGN. Some styles of communication, like for instance styles of negotiating, are linked with cultural habits. Simultaneously, between cultures, other styles of communication, such as, for instance, communicating by pressing authority, have nothing to do with culture. There is a strange phenomenon that shows that people tend to stress and insist on authority more in other cultures as a way to compensate for the lack of power they usually experience as self-evident in their original cultural context. The difference between foreign and indigenous is much bigger than any of the simple dichotomies, like authority versus freedom, that allow us to explain.

The focus of this study is on culture and cross-cultural communication. Many of the examples and case studies come from my first-hand research. I am focused on China, have been focused in the past on the United States of America, South America, and I conduct

continuous research on the cultures and subcultures of ethnic minorities, as well as on the business between China and Europe. Through my specialized field in ethnopsychology, I counsel individual cases concerning cultural backgrounds in healthcare and support international students in both China and the Netherlands. In cross-cultural training communication in international companies and at universities, I have gathered a rich pool of research data on cross-cultural business communication. Researching international relations, organizing informative seminars on law cultures, company cultures, and international economic developments, provides me with the information in which cultures are embedded globally.

This book hopefully gives an alternative to the literature of cookbook recipes in cross-cultural communication courses. Many teachers in various universities of applied sciences complained in the past about the one-sided approach they encountered in the literature.

Throughout my career, I experienced that knowledge is indeed an active acquisition process. This book, therefore, will not provide cookbook recipes for cross-cultural communication. On the contrary, it is a book which requires the active participatory involvement of its readers, and I hope I can stimulate readers to enter the adventure of really getting to know ''the other'' within and across her/his and its culture.

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Mariska Stevens

With gratitude also to all my countless students in Cultural Anthropology/Non-Western Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and my 400 International Trade and Business Administration students in Shanghai Center of International Studies, Poland, USA, and everywhere else! Next page: Protest by the Chinese community In Amsterdam about the negative press before the Olympic Games 2008

Introduction: A Sense of Culture

Summary
*In this introduction, the definitions of culture, theoretical assumptions, and the structure of this book are explained. The book has been composed in such a way that explanations, cases, and descriptions are alternated by thought experiments. Through these thought experiments, and by practically responding to the questions in the text, readers become active in reflecting on ideas about their cultures and those of others. These questions are highlighted as **CCCI (cross-cultural communication items)** and will provide the reader with a ''sense of culture''. The principle familiarizes the reader with interactive reading. On a practical level, these CCCI-items can be used by teachers in cross-cultural (business) communication as assignments, exam questions, and in-class experiments. After introducing a ''Sense of Culture'' and describing the theoretical assumptions of this book through the work of the anthropologist Edward Sapir, this chapter will summarize the sequence of chapters and their focus.*

A Sense of Culture?

To give a definition of culture is not a simple recipe. In my teaching to create a first sense of culture, I always start with the following thought experiment;

> '' How would you understand an abstract painting? You look at it, at first you will transfer all the forms and shapes you think you recognize onto the painted image, then the painter will tell you her idea, and you realize you did not understand anything. But the painter is not entirely free, and also transfers the words of explanation onto you. These words have a different meaning for you than for the painter. So, how do both of you share an understanding of the painting?
>
> You empty your mind of all prejudice, judgment, expectation, and idea fixes and look at the painting to see what it gives you, then, something happens, and you will realize the beginning of real understanding is there, even if you cannot share it in words." What is culture? Culture is like an abstract painting. It takes an effort to understand it, and nothing about it is self-evident. To understand culture, you need to understand yourself as well as the ''other''.

CCCI: As a thought experiment, try to formulate what culture means to you.

Is There a Solid Definition of Culture?

No, there is not, sorry! One of the most remarkable attempts of a dynamic concept of culture is described by the cultural anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir (1884-

1939). Edward Sapir has been identified as a member of the famous ''Culture and Personality'' school, which laid down the foundations of Cultural Anthropology in the United States. This school did extensive research on the relationship between culture and personality, yet Edward Sapir, being a linguist as well, extended this research much further into the field of comparative studies. He researched at least seven different Native American languages, in addition to mastering Yiddish and Chinese. In his essay 'Culture Genuine and Spurious (1985)', written around 1925, Sapir gives three major popular definitions of culture. These definitions cover a clear spectrum as part of the older Western philosophical tradition. The irony is that all our definitions of culture, or even the entire notion of culture as a concept, are also Western hemisphere inventions! Sapir's ideas will help us on the way towards understanding.

The first definition of culture Sapir explains is in its technical application by the ethnologist and cultural historian, and is aimed to embody any socially inherited element in the life of man, material and spiritual. Culture so defined is co-terminus with man himself (1985: 309). This definition clearly embodies the old hierarchical element of the 'so-called' difference between men and animals, and also creates the danger of highlighting the 'so-called' difference between complex and primitive societies.

CCCI: *Do you believe in primitive societies? And if so, would you be able to build a computer if computers all over the world were destroyed in this instance? Could you build a house? Do you consider yourself to be primitive when you cannot do these ''complicated'' actions?*

The second definition of culture refers to the rather conventional ideal of individual refinement, built on a certain modicum of assimilated knowledge and experience, while made up chiefly of a set of typical reactions which have the sanction of a class and a tradition of long standing. This definition of culture, or 'the cultured man,' gains a different meaning in the American context than it does in the European context. Sapir considers this type of culture snobbishness and argues in this sense:

> *The ghost of the past, preferably the remote past, haunts the cultured man at every step. He is uncannily responsive to their* slightest touch; he *shrinks from employment of his individuality as creative agency (1985: 310).*

CCCI: *Can you imagine what would be snobbishness in your culture? What do you consider refined and superior regarding being ''cultured and sophisticated?*

The third definition culture shares with Sapir's first definition a technical conception and also emphasis on the spiritual possessions of the group rather than of the individual. It is especially this third definition for which Sapir warns us as he continues:
> *Culture thus becomes nearly synonymous with the 'spirit' or 'genius' of a people, yet not altogether, for whereas these loosely used terms refer rather to a psychological, or pseudo-psychological, background of national civilization,*

culture includes with this background a series of concrete manifestations which are believed to be peculiarly symptomatic of it. Culture, then, may be briefly defined as civilization insofar as it embodies the national genius (1985: 310).

This idea of national genius is still very apparent in many cultures. On the surface, this idea seems to point towards older sets of a national cultural ideal. The national genius, many times, is a pseudo-psychology; it tends to focus on the heroes of the nation. The soccer players, the writers, actors, scientists, sportsmen and women, popular music bands, and all kinds of representatives underline the importance of the cultural genius.

CCCI: Question: Can you name several images of the cultural genius of your culture, which could be called manifestations of national pride? The answer is also why you chose these images.

Sapir neither confirms nor refutes these definitions. Rather, he tries to create an alternative definition of culture. Simultaneously borrowing some features from the former definitions, Sapir defines his concept of genuine culture:

> The genuine culture is not necessarily either high or low; it is merely inherently harmonious, balanced, and self-satisfactory. It is the expression of a richly varied yet somehow unified, consistent attitude toward life, an attitude which sees the significance of any one element of civilization in its relation to all others. It is, ideally speaking, a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless, in which no important part of the general functioning brings with it a sense of frustration, of misdirected or unsympathetic effort (1985: 311).

This 'harmonious ideal of genuine culture is, also in Sapir's work, an **ideal**. The features of this definition are more the features of absence than of presence. We could consider Sapir's warnings directed towards the results of an industrial and economically dominated society, which leaves no time for genuine culture as a result of one-sided activity regarding the division of labor. Sapir makes no difference between a person behind a switchboard in the United States and a Ballet dancer from the Bolshoi theater in the former Soviet Union. For both persons, the bulk of their activities denies them access to other parts of culture, and this denial results in a dependency on 'spurious culture.'

Spurious culture, in Sapir's definition, implies that individuals lack the time to experience the variety of cultural aspects and, as a result, they are led to copy these aspects. Clearly, Sapir's definition of genuine culture is one that considers culture to be a good thing, accessible to all. It also clearly shows his affiliation with psychology did not come from its alleged cultural, biological, and psychological analysis, but from a sense of individual experience within culture.

CCCI: Question: How much time do you have to experience your culture as an active rather than a passive participant?

Culture is…..

Regarding an abstract definition, one could say culture concerns all the shared seen and unseen influences individuals experience from the day they are born, as they are born and raised inside a culture. It is not a choice; it is a condition.

CCCI: The next question beyond the definition of culture, of course, is, what is an individual? Well, this question cannot be answered in general, except by you, and about yourself. Try it.

To come to some workable idea of this condition, we need to look at an approach to culture from two different perspectives:

- A look at culture from the inside outwards:

Every nation has its definition of culture: The Chinese look upon culture as the inheritance of Confucius, of calligraphy and writing, and, for instance, traditional Chinese medicine and Gong Fu. In the Netherlands, for instance, culture is often referred to as ''norms and values. This idea is hardly understood outside Dutch culture. Many times I receive the question from foreigners: " What do your politicians mean when they talk about norms and values?'' In the United States, culture is often defined as ''the right to the pursuit of happiness, " and in many other nations, culture is determined by the values of the religious backgrounds (Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu) of the majority of the nation, rather than as a cultural tradition. All cultures create boundaries between those groups inside the domain of their culture and those groups outside the domain of their culture. Understanding the cultures of others, trying to look at their culture from the inside, is called an *EMIC* approach in Cultural Anthropology.

- A look at culture from the outside inwards:

The former definition means you are an insider looking at a different culture, with the baggage of your culture. Do not underestimate the dominance of your insiders' cultural judgments. No one can simply leave behind his or her culture and adopt another. Many times in the West, for instance, when people decide to change from Protestant religion to Buddhism, they find their friends might observe, "You did not change at all, in fact, you have become more Protestant than ever''. If you look at another culture from the outside inwards, you create a distance which looks at the more face value expressions of culture, dress code, objects of art, cooking, in short, the cultural make-up and such. This look does not guarantee understanding the motives or emotional drives from within a culture. Understanding the cultures of others, trying to look at their culture from the outside, is called an *ETIC* approach in Cultural Anthropology.

Emic and etic are concepts that originate from linguistics; they are the technical terms for Phonemic, the inner structure of a language, and Phonetic, the sound structure of a language. Hence, the inner 'emic' sense of culture, and what it 'sounds like' 'etic' sense of culture.

These approaches will return throughout the book, and the active reader eventually will know how to use these approaches in becoming a genuine cross-cultural researcher, creating a balanced view of the cultures both inside and outside.

CCCI: Question: Do you know which particular cultural conditions influenced you in your life?

Cultural Anthropology

What then is Cultural Anthropology? Cultural Anthropology is the scientific discipline that studies all parts of human behavior in an interconnected and interrelated context, which is referred to as **culture.** Cultural Anthropology looks at human behavior at micro levels of society (which could be a family, a school, a company, a village, a town) and researches how these micro levels are interconnected with macro levels of societies (which could be the national state, the national economy and politics, the world economy and relations between nations, systems of law, views, and perception about religion, etc.).

Cultural Anthropology aims to analyze the interplay between individuals and their immediate surroundings, as well as indirect levels of culture that influence communication. Cultural Anthropology investigates cultures in their historical, organic, contemporary, and changing spectrum of views, conservative traditions, pathfinders and avant-garde carriers, compensational and balancing elements, and seen and unseen influences.

In doing social research, it is important to understand that no social science is objective. The idea of objectivity in social sciences has created a lot of misunderstandings. For instance, for a very long time, after the Second World War, the focus within society has been on the fluctuation of the economy and the changes both in and between group processes in society. The field of business administration and business management is concentrated partly around ideas on differences in economic systems emanating from the Cold War period.

These differences in economic systems created dichotomies such as liberal and socialist societies, and separations between cultures, on which models of human behavior and communication were built. Especially concerning South East Asia, the political approach focused on the difference between ''planned'' economies and ''democratic'' or liberalistic approaches to the economy, most sharply defined in the difference between socialist and capitalist economies.

After World War Two, below the surface of global tensions, these dichotomies primarily served political aims. They had little to do with real-time research. Alongside Cultural Anthropology research, organizational management became very popular in business studies. However, most of the research outcomes of the corresponding discipline ''organizational behavior'' are based on lists of opinions from non-researchers in the international business field, creating models exclusively formulated on cultures from the outside (the *ETIC* perspective) and never the experience of culture from the inside as described in (the *EMIC* perspective). A strong example of this can be found in the research

of Geert Hofstede (2010), whose data comes from questionnaires registered by personnel of IBM in a foreign context. The answers were highly subjective as none of these workers was a trained anthropologist. As a result, the categories Hofstede applied remained rather opinionated ideas on the culture of ''those others''. We will explain more about the problems concerning this type of opinion research in the course of the book.

Within everyday society, " leftover Cold War " opinions seem hardly recognized. Newspapers, profit, and non-profit organizations, businesses, both national and multinational, government departments, and civil movements become part of theoretical models which, in time, were taken for granted, many times without rethinking or questioning their existence. The accompanying ideas, like is the case with all models, reveal a tendency to replace reality by the model, as models are so much easier to apply than dynamic theories describing the complex elements of culture, society, and communication.

CCCI: If you think of highly subjective perceptions, which topics come to mind, and how do they relate to the perceivable reality?

Most of these models have little to do with the makings or workings of society and culture as researched in cultural anthropology, and as a result, soon develop into stereotypes about dimensions of culture like power distance, masculinity and femininity, uncertainty avoidance, classes within societies, etc. Some websites even extend any conceivable reality. Just register the name of a country, and a complete profile (read stereotype) comes out with a ''recipe'' for communication. The reality, however, is less simple.

One must realize, however, that the organization of companies, businesses, and commercial enterprises is different from the dynamics of culture. As entities, they are subcultures at most. I would not even call them that, as they are constructed through highly temporal contexts. Simultaneously, company cultures, so defined, are in effect clusters organized towards Western-style commercial activities, and such clusters have little to do, as we will see, with culture and cultural anthropology.

Unfortunately, the application of such clusters tends to be blind to the experience of the observer about the groups they describe. For example, when I talk to Irish, Scottish, and English people, they react completely flabbergasted when they hear British society has been called a ''classless society''. Women in most Western countries are angered at the ridicule that discrimination against women in academics is non-existent nowadays, according to organizational behavior theories, which claim that Western cultures are emancipated. These same theories uphold ideas that girls are prone to learning languages and boys to mathematics, and very obviously never look at hidden mechanisms of discriminatory practices, such as school advice, or plain prejudice on the role of boys and girls during childhood education.

CCCI: Could you name more examples of this type of dichotomies and prejudices?

Why is cultural anthropology different from other disciplines? Cultural anthropology is one of the oldest academic disciplines in Western science, but its origins are negative.

Colonists, conquerors, priests, moralists, and adventurers were among the first anthropologists. Their ideas on primitive cultures considered Non-Western peoples as barely rising above the level of animals, making it easy to enslave and exploit them. Because of these former ''crimes, " as a result, anthropology has experienced change and more specifically a strong movement of self-reflection in critical approaches between the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries,

From the beginning of the 20th century, cultural anthropology has been subjected to radical reviews of its role in world politics and its role in power structures. As an academic discipline, it was forced to be confronted with Western prejudices on religion (as a result of the Western tendency to convert other cultures towards Christianity and ethnocentric ideas about race (as a result of historical circumstances in European fascism and emancipation movements). Finally, imperialism and modern imperialism became fiercely criticized in cultural anthropology, as a result of the decolonization period after World War II.

As such, anthropology has a unique place among the social sciences, and one might say it learned from its mistakes, leading to various generations of researchers raised as scientists being continuously aware of the ease with which stereotypes are constructed in society. In this sense, anthropology brought forth the most suitable perspective to deal with cross-cultural communication, probably, I argue, more than any other social scientific discipline.

CCCI: *If you reflect on other social scientific disciplines, like psychology, economics, or sociology, how would you characterize their main Western cultural characteristics?*

One other reason makes cultural anthropology important as a feature of cross-cultural communication. Within the modern world, culture and nations are not easily separated by national boundaries. Labor migration, migrant movements through disasters of war, environmental and economic causes, create multiple and diverse communities in which communication has become an enterprise in itself. In the future, one can speak of the characteristics of the entrepreneurial person within culture, rather than the culture within a person's actions.

Cultural anthropology needs a cross-cultural communication perspective; it may form the basis of our social scientific understanding of the world as a globalized whole. This book then aims to extend the discipline of cultural anthropology with a dynamic approach to cross-cultural communication.

Sequence and Content Of the Chapters

In **chapter one**, '' Broken Quasars: The Spectrum of Social Scientific Disciplines and Theories Cross-Cultural Communication'' provides a context on how cultural anthropology developed alongside its other social disciplines. This context is important to understand that social sciences are not similar to natural sciences. As explained, they are not ''objective'' in

spite of the fact that many scientists strive to suggest objectivity using mathematical, as well as biological, interpretations of human behavior. In reality, whenever one sees the expression: ''It has been proven that''…be on guard of what follows. Close research hardly ever shows any such proof.

The chapter also describes the overall theoretical connection between cross-cultural communication and the social scientific disciplines that surround it. It is a short history that analyzes influential streams across scientific theories, from the early 19th century onwards. The chapter sequentially evaluates the influence of early mainstream social scientists in anthropology, economics, sociology, and linguistics on the later development of the disciplines of economics, psychology, anthropology, history, and social psychology. The chapter furthermore examines which tendencies gave way to the rise of organizational behavior and management studies. Here, the purpose is not to create an extensive history of disciplines. The concepts mentioned in chapter one will return in later chapters within more specific contexts. Here, it is intended to give the reader an idea of the complexity of intertwined social scientific theory.

In **chapter two** on "Language and Culture,'' we will learn how language creates distances between cultures, and how concepts and perception make us aware that many concepts and words, even in translation, will never mean the same in different cultures. It will also show how easy it is to judge cultures along the lines of sophistication. Completely outdated, ideas on high culture and low culture still haunt the ''cultured' man, as Edward Sapir once remarked, as we could see earlier in this chapter. Labels like developed, underdeveloped, primitive, first world, second world, and third world are the result of a long tradition of evolutionary thinking in which cultures are classified as ''modern'' or primitive. Can culture be defined through the use of language? How can a social science be objective if its language or discourse can, by its very nature, not ever become objective? These aspects of language and linguistics create limitations for human and individual expression. In spite of what we tend to believe, language is indeed limited in its possibilities for expression. The 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, even proposed on the origin of language, that language is not intended for people to better communicate with each other, but rather, to escape from each other (Rousseau, 1967). In analyzing cross-cultural communication, here the speech event analysis from the anthropologist, Dell Hymes (1989), is introduced.

Chapter three on economy and culture describes the unbreakable bonds between economy and culture and the way we tend to look at the cultures of non-Western societies. How much of our ideas on culture are determined by the economic expectations we have about welfare, wellbeing, superiority, and inferiority, and to what extent do we let the economy drive and dictate our views of our culture and others? Here I point towards the history of the concept of the corporation and its acclaimed legal rights of ownership, and the difficulty of transferring the American concept of the company and the corporation onto the contexts of other cultures, like, for instance, those in the Trobriand culture.