

Some Conceptual and Theoretical Challenges for Cross-Cultural Communication Research in the 21st Century

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This essay details select conceptual and theoretical challenges facing intercultural and cross-cultural communication research in the present and future. Notable challenges include defining culture and studying culture in a manner consistent with this definition. Issues related to the unit of analysis and conceptual equivalence are discussed. Regarding theory, some implications of individualism and collectivism are considered, and relational models theory is considered as a viable alternative. Finally, the issue of small effect sizes in studies of cross-cultural differences is addressed. Given current trends in globalization, meeting these challenges and moving forward is more important than ever.

Keywords: Culture; Cross-Cultural Communication; Intercultural Communication; Theory; Methodology

The challenges social scientists face in making defensible knowledge claims about human interaction can seem daunting. Threats to validity abound, unexplained variance (i.e., error terms) are usually disturbingly large, attempts at replication almost invariably lead to literatures full of “mixed findings,” and the data frequently contradict our favorite theories. Throwing cultural variability into the mix adds considerably to this already high “degree of difficulty” in knowledge claim making. Cross-cultural communication researchers face all the difficulties of established mono-culture social science plus those salient to making cross-culture

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comparisons, to studying intercultural interactions, or to both. These additional challenges are the focus of this paper.

Although the challenges presented by inter- and cross-cultural research are numerous, complex, and difficult, they must be met. We cannot have a viable communication science that applies only to white, upper middle class, Christian, American young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who attend major research universities. This particular demographic represents only a small fraction of humans and human interaction.¹ Changes in globalization, from improved travel and increased tourism, to the rise of the internet, to the increasingly global economy, to the emergence of international terrorism, to the international expansion of the communication discipline, make meeting these challenges increasingly salient and pressing.

As just a single example, the first author of this paper recently attended a mini conference on credibility assessment. The idea was to put practitioners (e.g., homeland security, military intelligence, etc.) together with leading researchers so that the researchers could tell practitioners what is currently known, and the practitioners could tell the researchers about the needs of the practitioners. The implications of validity, in this context, are substantial, and the size of the error term has real meaning. The number one need, it turned out, fell squarely under the rubric of culture and communication. The practitioners wanted to know about cross-cultural similarities and differences in behaviors indicative of deception, and about how people from one culture could elicit accurate information from people of another culture. The research experts (mostly university faculty from psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, criminal justice, communication, etc.) could speculate (based on individualism-collectivism, high- and low-context cultures, etc.), but all agreed upon the lack of hard and reliable data on the topic in general, much less if there are reliable Sunni-Shiite differences, and what those might be.

So, the need is real, and it is not just about deception or security-relevant topics. The gap between current knowledge and what we need to know is great and in dire need of spanning. The ambitious goal of this article is to concisely discuss how scientifically oriented communication researchers might go about meeting this need. Good research requires and begins with a solid conceptual foundation, so this is where this paper will focus. But, the conceptual foundation of research is intertwined with research design, statistical analysis, and interpretation of results, so these issues get attention as well.

The premise of this article is that good, useful, and informative research is based on a solid conceptual foundation. While the challenges to successful knowledge generation are both real and daunting, the path to overcoming these challenges is thoughtful research design and data interpretation based on solid conceptualization and, better still, valid and useful theory.

So, for example, if someone wants to study cultural similarities and differences, they need to first know what culture is. How culture is defined will have implications for all aspects of the research process. Other basic issues such as the unit of

analysis and conceptual equivalence must also be considered before the research design is finalized if the data are to have meaning and utility. As another example, when making hypotheses about anticipated cultural differences, culture can be specified as a main effect, as antecedent in a causal string, or as a moderator. The type of hypothesis advanced will govern the research design and analysis and ultimately the interpretation of the results.

From a solid conceptual foundation, viable theory can arise. Therefore, this essay next briefly discusses current theory and reviews a new and promising theory ('Relational Models' by Alan Fiske, 2004) that may prove useful for communication researchers. Finally, the problem of small effects and large error terms are also discussed.

The Challenge of Definition

Investigation of cultural similarities and differences requires a strong conceptual foundation. Fundamentally, this must include a definition of culture. More specifically, special attention must be given to determining and clarifying conceptual and operational definitions of constructs/variables pertaining to cultural and individual variations. Additionally, the role of culture and relationships among constructs must be defined adequately at various levels of analysis, whether it be the message-level, individual-level, culture-level, or across levels (e.g., considering both individual and culture levels simultaneously). That is, the unit or level of observation or analysis and subsequent theoretical and inferential implications need to be considered when defining constructs/variables, making theoretical predictions, and testing them cross-culturally. The interrelated complexity of addressing these definitional issues pose a great challenge to inter- and cross-cultural research.

Some Basic Definitions, Distinctions, and Their Implications

Culture has been defined simply as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004, p. 4). Similarly, Gudykunst and Kim (1992) conceive of culture as "systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people" (p. 13). Of course, more elaborate definitions exist. However, regardless of the specific definition adopted, it is usually agreed that culture is a collective phenomenon. It is, by definition, something that is shared among people belonging to the same socially defined and recognized group. Culture is something people have in common with some people but not with others.

It should be noted, however, that the individual is not always a possible or meaningful unit in cross-cultural comparisons. Groups or organizations within each culture can be units for observation. Another way to find important and interesting cross-cultural differences in communication patterns is to gather data

from what might be called cultural artifacts (e.g., newspaper stories, television dramas, etc.) in different cultures and to compare them.

Another issue to consider is whether or not nations and cultures can be meaningfully equated for the purpose of a specific research project. Nations and cultures are sometimes confused and very often confounded in theory and research. The implications of conflating the two, however, vary greatly depending on the goals of a particular research project. Treating nations as cultures can be either extremely useful or highly misleading, and the conscious decision to treat national origin as national culture often reflects a trade-off between the two.

Whereas nations can have multiple cultures and be comprised of peoples with many different cultural groups, it is also often the case that people in one nation often have a unifying national identity (e.g., Canadian, Chinese, Egyptian, German, Indian, Korean, Mexican, U.S. American), language, and the same political, legal, economic, and educational systems. These and many other commonalities distinguish, in culture-relevant ways, peoples of one nation from peoples of other nations. The current paper often equates culture with national culture, but this is done mindfully because the heuristic value gained outweighs the conceptual costs for the current purposes. The current authors encourage researchers to make active, reasoned, and defensible decisions about issues such as these. Sweeping claims, such as national origin is not culture, or mindlessly equating nations and cultures, are best avoided.

Intercultural versus cross-cultural communication

Another important distinction to make at the onset is between intercultural and cross-cultural communication. These two topics reflect the two major areas of research related to culture and communication. Although these two areas sound similar and are clearly related to one another, they are also frequently confused.

Cross-cultural communication research involves comparing and contrasting the communication patterns of people of one culture with the communication patterns observed in people from a different culture. Alternatively, intercultural communication research deals with the interaction between people of different cultures. So, for example, if Koreans are compared with French with the aim of finding some similarity or difference in some aspect of communication, the resulting study can accurately be labeled cross-cultural communication research. However, if the interaction between a Korean person and a French person is studied, then it is intercultural communication.

Whether the focus is on intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication has important implications for the unit of analysis (which will be discussed more fully later). In cross-cultural comparisons, there are at least two levels, the culture-level and the individual-level (or, if the study is of advertisements, for example, then the individual advertisement might be the unit of analysis). When the focus is on communication between people from different cultures, the unit of analysis also includes the interaction. Thinking more broadly, the communication between two (or more) culturally distinctive groups,

organizations, and/or nations could be the focus of intercultural communication. Here, note that groups, organizations, and/or nations themselves are the interacting agents, not the cultures. When examining intercultural communication, it is usually the case that researchers examine how cultural characteristics in each group, each organization, and/or each nation influence the interactions among the groups, the organizations, and/or the nations.

When examining intercultural communication, one important issue to remember is not automatically treating all interaction between individuals from different cultures as intercultural communication. For example, when Jane from USA and John from Germany interact with one another, not all aspects of their interactions reflect intercultural/international communication. Only when their communication patterns reflect their corresponding cultural characteristics and assumptions can we treat their interaction as intercultural communication. Obviously, Jane and John may differ in ways other than their culture.

The findings from cross-cultural communication research do not necessarily transfer automatically to predictions about intercultural communication. Just because members of one cultural group have high frequencies of apologizing to their fellow members, it does not mean that they will also show high frequencies of apologizing to a member of another cultural group. Although it is certainly informative to know cultural characteristics of members of one cultural group when predicting what might happen when the group members encounter/interact with members of another cultural group, there is no guarantee that cross-cultural communication differences will be fully exhibited in intercultural communication.

Defining Relevant Constructs across Cultures: Conceptual Equivalence

If a culture's impact on communication is to be quantitatively studied, that is if two or more cultures are to be compared or contrasted in terms of some aspect of communication, conceptual equivalence is a necessity. Colloquially, researchers need to compare apples and apples, not apples and oranges. More formally, the conceptual definitions of the constructs under investigation need to be constant, general, and equally valid in each of the cultures compared.

Perhaps an example might help illustrate the issue. Imagine a researcher wanted to study cross-cultural differences in deception. The question of conceptual equivalence is "does deception mean the same thing in both cultures?" In topics such as deception, this poses a real obstacle to research design. It may be that blatant self-serving lies count as deception everywhere, but deception via omission and equivocation count as deception in the United States, but may not in so-called high-context cultures where communication is expected to be less direct.

Unless the answer to the equivalence question is affirmative, meaningful quantitative assessment cannot follow because differences in amount or degree are confounded with difference in type or kind. So, in order to meaningfully compare differences in amount or degree, the constructs must exist in all the different cultures assessed, and the meaning of the construct must be the same.

If a reasonable argument for conceptual equivalence can be made, then and only then is it reasonable to try to measure the construct in each of the cultures under study. In order for the measures to be meaningfully comparable, however, a second set of requirements must be met. The conceptual equivalence needs to translate to a corresponding operational equivalence. That is, the measures must be equivalently construct valid in each of the cultures tested. For example, scale invariance can be considered for same scale origin, scale metric, and metric after linear transformation (Poortinga, 1989). Multiple group confirmatory factor analysis can be one of various ways to check scale invariance (Byrne & Campbell, 1999).

Defining the Effects of Culture: Main Effect, Mediated, or Moderator

Before specifically discussing different ways in which culture may influence dimensions of communication, it is fundamentally important to distinguish whether researchers are investigating culture per se or examining cultural influence on people's communication patterns. The two are not the same, and involve different units of analysis and different presumptions about causal order. In one case, the sample size is the number of cultures investigated while in the other it is likely the number of communicators studied (or perhaps the number of messages). Therefore, we suggest that would-be cross-cultural communication researchers ask themselves if they primarily want to know about culture, communication, the impact of the former on the latter, the impact on the former of that latter, or some combination of these questions.

If inquiry is focused on cultural impact on communication patterns and conceptual equivalence is established, then the next question for researchers is *how* culture impacts the communication dimensions/aspects of interest. Researchers likely have reasoned expectations about how the constructs of interest play out in different cultures under consideration. When hypothesizing about cultural similarities and differences, there are at least three possibilities regarding the role of culture in relation to some communication outcome: culture may have a main or direct effect, culture may have a mediated effect, or culture might be considered as a moderator.

Main effect

The most simple and common type of hypothesis specifies culture as a direct cause for an observed difference. For example, one might expect that when people from a presumably collectivistic culture are more or less likely to lie than those from more individualistic cultures. The use of t-tests, ANOVAs, or chi squares to test cultural differences reflects a culture-as-main-effect approach where the means or frequencies of some outcome are expected to be different in different cultures.

Mediator

However, some theoretical positions specify that the impact of culture is indirect. For example, culture may influence self-construal, which, in turn, is the direct

cause of communication differences. From such a perspective, people from individualist cultures are more likely to have a self-concept defining the self as a unique individual, and people who define themselves as such are more likely to deceive for self gain (cf. Kim, 2002). Here, culture's effect is hypothesized to be mediated.

Moderator

Perhaps a more informative approach is to find a moderator. At its basic form, a moderator affects the relationship between two variables. For cross-cultural communication, examination of moderators can take two forms. First, culture can be treated as a moderator; the relationship between two variables varies in different cultures. For example, gender differences in communication apprehension may be much bigger in one culture than in another culture. Second, a moderator might exist for a relationship between culture and a variable. That is, cultural differences in a variable vary at different levels of a moderator. For example, cultural differences in communication apprehension are bigger for men than for women. Though these two forms are identical from a data analytic point of view, depending on theories and/or research foci, researchers can decide to conceptually treat culture as a moderator or investigate a moderator for cultural differences in a variable.

Defining the Unit (or Level) of Analysis

The unit of analysis, or the level of analysis, has implications for theory development and testing in cross-cultural communication research. The level(s) that a theory seeks to explain and predict should guide the selection of levels for observation (Roberts, Hulin, & Rousseau, 1978). Theorists and researchers should specify the levels at which the constructs of interest apply and hypothesized relationships occur. In turn, these are the levels at which data should be collected and statistically analyzed.

Specifying the levels of analysis also has implications for interpreting and generalizing research findings. Specifying levels of theory involves making predictions for the relationships among theoretical constructs based on differences due to culture, individual differences regardless of culture, or differences within cultures. Explicit specification and explication of the level of a theory and the sources of variability (individual level, national culture/cultural group level, and multilevel) can enhance clarity, depth, comprehensiveness, and creativity of theories. In clarifying levels of a theory in cross-cultural communication research, we discuss two types of variability in conceptualization and operationalization of constructs/variables and the relationship among them.

Unity variability

If a theory presupposes cultural groups (as opposed to individuals) as entities for a certain construct or characterizes members of a cultural group as similarly possessing a certain attribute, the theory should convincingly argue that unity

(or uniformity) exists among group members in such a way that cultural group members are sufficiently similar with each other regarding the construct. In other words, unity among the members of a culture for construct X means that construct X is meaningful at the cultural group level, not at the individual level, and that cultures can be compared for their variations in construct X. An example of a unity construct is collective esteem as a culture-level construct that characterizes a cultural group as a whole. Since collective esteem can arise from individual members' interaction via various modes (e.g., mass media) influencing one another, defining and measuring collective esteem, as a culture-level construct, require consensus (i.e., agreement) at the individual level.

Another example of unity constructs can be self-construals, if and only if the independent and interdependent self-construals are considered as the "individual-level culture dimension" and if treated as mediators for the effect of individualism/collectivism on individual-level communication attributes and behaviors of interest. If collectivistic cultural characteristics are supposed to affect the individual members of the culture to have a certain level of interdependent self-construal, researchers should demonstrate both conceptually and operationally that the self-construals are uniform constructs/variables within each culture. Statistically speaking, measures such as intraclass correlation (ICC) should show that greater amount of variance in self-construals are attributed to cultural differences rather than individual differences. In this case, the ICC estimates the degree to which cultural group members are similar to each other relative to non-members. If ICC is close to zero, no cultural differences are inferred for the variables of interest (e.g., independent and interdependent self-construal), and the construct is not a viable mediator of some cultural-level difference. A zero or close-to-zero intraclass correlation indicates that grouping individual data based on culture membership is irrelevant for the relationship between the variables of interest, and subsequently can be ignored in statistical analyses. In other words, on a variable of interest, people in the same cultural group are as different from each other as people in other cultural groups are different from them.

Disunity variability

Theories involving disunity assume that individuals or cultures alone are not compelling, but individuals (and their attributes and behaviors) within the culture are. Two types of disunity can exist: (a) disunity in the meanings of a construct and (b) disunity in the relationship among constructs. For disunity of a given construct, meanings and/or characteristics of the construct vary across different cultures. Construct X in one culture does not necessarily have the equivalent counterpart in another culture. For such constructs, straightforward cross-cultural comparison probably is meaningless. A possibility for cross-cultural comparison on a non-equivalent construct, however, may involve a situation where a construct has taken on different meanings over time in two cultural groups as each of the cultural groups experience different political and economical development, etc.

In such case, in-depth and/or over-time analysis on how meanings of a (seemingly similar) construct have changed in different cultures can be more fruitful.

Disunity in theoretical relationships indicates that, for constructs whose meanings and/or characteristics are equivalent across different cultures, the relationship between the constructs (or variables) depends on cultural characteristics (e.g., a construct/variable can function differently in different cultures). Hence, conceptualization and operationalization of disunity variability and testing of a disunity theory (i.e., theory predicting varied relationships among two or more constructs across different cultures) requires understanding of both individuals and cultures. Theories focusing on disunity in the relationship among constructs may involve culture as a moderator, rather than as a main effect.

Defining Situational Contexts: Situation by Culture Interactions

Seemingly simple communication processes do not always unfold in simple ways. When investigating cultural differences and similarities in communication, it is important to also pay attention to the specific situational and/or relational context in which communication occurs. Cultures differ in numerous aspects. Cultural differences in general communication styles do not necessarily apply across different situations and relational contexts. Although it is still useful to consider culture as a main effect accounting variances in communication attributes and behaviors, caution needs to be exercised against making an overly generalized and simplistic conclusion about cultural differences. Only if cultural differences in a certain communication style (e.g., direct/indirect speech pattern) replicate consistently across various types of individual differences and situational/relational contexts, etc., then culture can be considered as a main effect for that communication style. Realistically, it is more likely that cultural differences vary with individual differences and situational/relational contexts, etc., rather than being uniform across all types of situational and relational context. For example, it has been argued that U.S. Americans are more likely to prefer direct style of communication than Koreans (Kim, 1994). A more prudent approach, however, might be to carefully examine the specific situational and/or relational context and/or individual differences in which communication styles are observed and measured. It is possible that Koreans may use an indirect style of communication in situation A and a direct style in another situation B, while Americans may use a direct style of communication in situation A and an indirect style in situation B.

More about Mediators and Moderators

Implications of unity variability and disunity variability in constructs and relationships among constructs can be further illustrated with an effort to search for a mediator or a moderator in cross-cultural communication research. In the case of a moderator, culture can be treated as a moderator for a relationship between two constructs. On the other hand, an individual-level construct/variable can be also a moderator for the relationship between culture and communication

variables. In the case of a mediator, an individual-level construct is often considered as a link between culture and communication constructs. That is, cultural differences result in variations in a mediator, which subsequently affect variations in a communication construct. Here, the underlying assumption in theorizing about a mediator is that culture is a main effect for variation in the mediator.

For example, measuring the individual-level cultural dimensions with self-construal scales (or something similar) has led to treating the measured individual-level cultural dimensions as mediators between the cultural characteristics (e.g., individualism and collectivism) and dependent variables of interest (e.g., Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Kim et al., 1996). When treating the measured individual-level cultural dimensions as mediators, it is crucial to have a significant, substantial, and consistent relationship between culture and the measured individual-level cultural dimensions (i.e., the scores on the scales have to align with the national culture characteristics). When there is little consistent relationship between culture and the individual-level variable, the often-mentioned comments are 1) the sample is not representative of the culture (e.g., the wrong people to be recruited), 2) no cultural effects exist (e.g., culture does not have impact on individuals' attitudes and behaviors), or 3) the culture targeted in the study is not collectivistic (or individualistic) (e.g., if Chinese individuals score higher on independent self-construal than on interdependent self-construal, the national culture of China must not be collectivistic, but individualistic). When no relationship between culture and the measured individual-level cultural dimension is found, however, one also needs to consider the possibilities that either the construct is not really a mediator after all or that the measurement might be invalid (e.g., the scales do not measure what they are supposed to measure). In short, although it can be useful to focus on the mediators for the relationship between culture and other variables of interest, assessing mediators should not be the requirement for conducting cross-cultural communication research as a validity check on cultural sampling adequacy.

Instead, we think that more attention needs to be paid to examining moderators for the relationship between cultural characteristics and variables of interest. Many of the variables useful for cross-cultural communication research, which can be measured at the individual-level and included as moderators, can also reveal the extent to which (or how) the individuals' attitudes and behaviors reflect their cultural characteristics (e.g., collectivistic and/or individualistic tendencies). Efforts to theorize about cross-cultural communication may need to consider that for various communication variables, the effect of culture may not be straightforward (e.g., a main effect for culture), but instead varies with different types and degrees of a relevant construct/variable that can affect the relationships between culture and outcome variables.

For example, there have been debates on culture as a main effect or as a moderator on positive self-regard (e.g., self-enhancement). Some researchers have argued that people in a culture typically characterized as collectivistic (e.g., East Asians)

have either no or less tendency to see themselves as better than others than do those in a culture typically characterized as individualistic (e.g., Westerners) (e.g., Bond & Cheung, 1983; Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Basically, Heine and his associates maintain that Westerners self-enhance and East Asians do not (Heine, Shinobu, & Takeshi, 2007; Heine & Takeshi, 2007). On the other hand, cultural differences in positive self-regard can depend on the types of context where self-evaluation is expressed (Kitayama & Uchida, 2003) or the types of attributes on which people evaluate themselves (Kurman, 2001; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Especially for desirable behaviors and attributes, people are likely to view themselves better than average (Alicke, 1985). For example, people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to hold positive self-regard for behaviors and attributes valued in their own culture than for those valued in individualistic cultures (Kurman, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Vevea, 2005). Here, we do not intend to side on whether culture is a main effect or a moderator for self-enhancement. Rather, we would like to suggest to cross-cultural communication researchers to think about whether to consider culture a main effect or a moderator for the specialties and domains of their interest.

The Challenge of Theory

Individualism-Collectivism

It is the current authors' perception that the idea of individualism-collectivism (I-C) is probably the dominant theoretical perspective guiding cross- and intercultural research (although we hasten to recognize the impact of face-politeness, high and low context cultures, and power-distance in thinking about the topic). Inquiry regarding intercultural communication very often invokes presumed differences along the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism or the related constructs of independent and interdependent self-construals. Although we believe there are some merit to these ideas, there are also persisting problems (e.g., Levine et al., 2003; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), and we believe that the area is ripe for reconceptualization, novel perspectives, and new theories.

According to Hofstede (1983),

Individualism, which stands for a preference for a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only; as opposed to *Collectivism*, which stands for a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals are emotionally integrated into an extended family, clan, or other in-group which will protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (pp. 295–296)

Triandis (1995) expands on these ideas:

Collectivism may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties

imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives.

Individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others. (p. 2)

When planning a study involving individualism-collectivism, researchers need to think about whether they are using or testing individualism-collectivism. When comparing people in at least two national cultures, researchers can *use* individualism-collectivism to make predictions about cultural differences. But individualism-collectivism should not be and cannot be the only thing that characterizes two national cultures. Individualism-collectivism is just one of many ways to characterize how some cultures differ from others.

If the goal of research is to *test* individualism-collectivism, each culture is the unit of analysis and researchers need to collect data from a good sized sample of cultures that are hypothesized to vary along individualism-collectivism. Including only two nations is not sufficient. Gudykunst (2002) suggested including four nations for conducting cross-cultural research, but the number is still too small for the goal of testing individualism-collectivism, because n is still only 4 (i.e., if a correlational analysis is used, degrees of freedom is only 2).

For more proper testing of whether cultures can be distinguished along the cultural dimension, individualism-collectivism, and/or of whether the cultural dimension, individualism-collectivism, can explain certain communication attitudes and behaviors of any given research interest, two approaches are recommended here. The first one involves a single study gathering data from many more than four cultures (e.g., 30+, but this is an arbitrary number because an appropriate sample size for proper statistical testing can depend on various factors such as measurement reliability and validity, variance, effect size, etc.). One of the data analytic techniques appropriate for this type of data is multilevel modeling, which can examine both individual and culture level variables simultaneously by regressing individual-level outcome variables on individual-level independent variables as well as culture-level variables. As the advance in multilevel modeling techniques and statistical software programs enables more elaborated and simultaneous examination of constructs at different levels, cross-cultural communication theories do not have to choose to theorize and analyze only one level at a time.

The second one involves a meta-analysis of many studies that include as few as two cultures in each individual study. A meta-analysis involves cumulating the results across several studies. This approach involves many smaller-scales studies, which, over time, accumulate and are quantitatively summarized. Thus, in the long run, useful data can be generated from studies comparing as few as two cultures.

Conducting cross-cultural communication research, however, should not be limited only to the two types of studies mentioned above. Practically speaking, collecting high quality data from a few or more dozen nations and/or cultural groups at once while maintaining conceptual and methodological equivalence is not an easy task that can be done well or frequently. It is certainly worthwhile to conduct a study with only one cultural group (e.g., with a sample from one cultural group researchers intend to replicate/contradict a well-established finding from another cultural group) or with two or more cultural groups to compare people in different national cultures. A study that compares two or more cultures for similarities and differences can provide good information by itself. Additionally, when there is a large collection of single studies, researchers can conduct a meta-analysis. Or, by combining raw data from multiple individual studies into one data file, researchers can also analyze the whole data with multilevel modeling.

Relational Models Theory

A relatively new theory that is likely to be especially useful to inter- and cross-cultural communications researchers is relational models theory (Fiske, 2004). The theory posits the existence of four fundamental and innate forms of relating and social interaction which form the basis of relationships and communication within and across all cultures. Culture, however, gives rise to differences in the triggering and implementation of these cognitive relational models in terms of the specific ways, extent, and contexts in which they are utilized (Fiske, 2000). Broad mental models of relating are thus modified with culture-specific, socially transmitted complements that produce predictable and tangible differences in social activity among cultures.

According to relational models theory (Fiske, 2004), all humans possess four fundamental and innate cognitive models for relating to others: *communal sharing* (CS), *authority ranking* (AR), *equality matching* (EM), and *market pricing* (MP). These relational models structure interaction based on perceptions of commonalities and distinctions. In CS, sociality is based on the perception of something held in common which establishes social equivalence. However, individuals common in one respect (e.g., blood ties) may be different in another (e.g., religious affiliation) and thus CS depends on the attribute that is relevant and salient. In contrast, social relations in AR are based on the perception of ordered differences among people and therefore social inequality is expected. Differences may be assessed according to a variety of attributes (e.g., age, rank) as long as it lends itself to a hierarchical ordering of people. In EM, sociality is based on the perception of additive imbalances with equal balance as the reference point. EM broadly involves a tit-for-tat approach (e.g., turn-taking, in kind reciprocation) to social interaction. Last, social activity in MP rests on the perception of ratios or rates regarding social exchange. For example, one may consider whether s/he is receiving fair wages in exchange for labor. Fiske (2004) refers to these four fundamental relational

models as *mods* to signify that “they are cognitively modular but modifiable modes of interacting” (p. 3).

The four fundamental relational models alone are insufficient without appropriate cultural complements to determine specific action, motivation, and evaluation within social situations (Fiske, 2000). That is, socially transmitted aspects of culture are required in order to know exactly when, with whom, and how relational mods apply. These necessary cultural aspects are called *preos*, which are defined as “the class of paradigms, parameters, precepts, prescriptions, and proscriptions that can be conjoined with mods” (Fiske, 2004, p. 4). Since preos determine when mods are relevant, mods are in a sense representative of alternative ways of doing things (Fiske, 2004). For instance, work on a company project might be organized in terms of mutual responsibility (CS), delegation to subordinates (AR), equal division of labor (EM), or negotiation of responsibility of different tasks (MP). Relational mods deemed appropriate according to preos drive the selection of approach. Preos also determine how to apply relational mods. Hence, there are countless potential particular implementations of relational mods depending on different complementing preos.

Combinations of mods and preos create specific cultural coordination devices, which in turn, and as a whole, constitute a structured system of coordination that regulate the formation and management of one’s complex web of relationships (Fiske, 2000; 2004). Culture is largely perpetuated through the aggregate convergence of cognitive representations at the population-level as people learn to complete mods with socially transmitted preos. However, the open-ended nature of relational mods also leaves room for cultural evolution.

From the perspective of relational models theory, broad cultural dimensions such as collectivism and individualism conflate many different types of sociality (Fiske, 2002), and this might explain some of the observed limitations in their empirical application to cross-cultural communication. For example, factor analyses of self-construal scales consistently yield more than two factors (Levine et al., 2003), and data collected in different cultures often fail to reflect the predicted order along cultural dimensions (Levine et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2002). Triandis and Gelfand (1998) suggested conceptual correspondence of collectivism and individualism with CS and MP respectively, and their vertical and horizontal dimensions with AR and EM. Theoretically, however, the mods signify modes of relating that transcend culture rather than categories for grouping cultures. Furthermore, even if the same relational model is applied within the same domain in different cultures, significant behavioral differences are likely due to the innumerable specific implementations of relational mods depending on the differences in complementing preos. Thus, relational models theory offers an alternative view of cultural differences and similarities that contrasts efforts to array cultures along a set of cultural dimensions or classify cultures into clusters or discrete categories.

The Challenge of Small Effect Sizes

A common belief among those who study culture might be described (with only slight exaggeration) as “culture determines everything.” That is, people from different cultures are often presumed to be very different social beings who communicate in fundamentally different ways. Claims such as people from individualist cultures are direct, egocentric, and egalitarian whereas people from collectivist cultures as indirect, face-conscious, harmonious, and respectful of authority abound. This view, however, clashes with the results of most quantitative cross-cultural communication findings where the effect sizes associated with tests of cultural differences are modest in comparison with the error terms, reflecting substantial within-culture variability and cross-cultural overlap. Clearly, either the cultural divide is not so large as often presumed or implied, or our research is not detecting differences that actually exist, or both.

While methodological improvements are surely needed, in our view it is equally important to consider cross-cultural similarities in addition to differences. We are all of the same species and come from the same gene pool. This is one appeal of relational models theory; it attempts to identify similarities in addition to differences.

It should also be recognized that a law of effect sizes is that the greater the number of independent predictors or causes, the smaller the impact of any one antecedent. Communication is complex, and guided by numerous factors, only one of which is culture. Thus, perhaps it is not surprising that effect sizes are modest.

The urge to explain within cultural differences with concepts of “individual-level culture,” however, might best be resisted. As we argued at the beginning, culture is something that is shared and transcends an individual. Within culture individual differences exist, but they do not provide satisfying theoretical explanations for culture’s impact. Searching for moderators may often times prove more fruitful.

An Approach to Cross-Cultural Research in the 21st Century

In this article, we have begun to sketch one possible approach to quantitative cross-cultural communication. This approach contrasts with work that sees individualism-collectivism having a fundamental dichotomy, splitting the world’s cultures into polar opposites and explaining all observed differences. It contrasts, too, with research collecting self-report data in two (or more) cultures and looking for statistically significant differences in means or with research inserting self-construal and an individual-level-culture mediator. What we propose is something different. Our approach begins with serious consideration of conceptual definitions, units of analysis, and conceptual equivalence. Culture is viewed as something that is shared by people.

The effects of culture will often be moderated, or alternatively, culture will alter how variables of interest are inter-related. Arguments for anticipated differences

will not be based solely on universal cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism or power distance, but instead are based on a more nuanced understanding of people within a specific culture or cultures. This may involve extensive reading of works produced within the culture in addition to comparative works. In this way, the challenges posed by injecting inter- and cross-cultural concerns into quantitative communication research can be met.

Note

- [1] We do not have a universal objection to the use of college students as research participants, and we certainly do not see research on non-student samples as inherently more valuable than student-based research. Instead, we see the extent to which findings generalize from one group to another as a theoretical and empirical question worthy of serious thought and valid test. Further, we almost always prefer a conceptually and methodologically solid finding with narrow generality, to a finding that is conceptually lacking, methodologically suspect, or both. Simply put, if one cannot have confidence in a finding, generality is moot. Finally, sometimes the college sophomore is treated as if he or she were a member of a different species, having little biologically or culturally in common with the rest of humanity. This is, in the opinions of the current authors, far from the case. College students are a convenient and useful source of research participants, but they cannot be the only category of individuals studied.

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