Sequential Cross-Cultural Learning: From Dimensions to Cultural Metaphors to Paradoxes

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In their focal article, Holt and Seki (2012) effectively describe four developmental shifts that organizational psychologists must make as they strive to produce cutting-edge research and educational programs. Holt and Seki correctly point out that global

leaders operate in a context of multicultural and bewildering paradoxical complexity, as do most of us, especially in a globalizing world. Further, they emphasize correctly that paradoxical thinking represents a higher level of thinking and conceptualizing than other forms of thinking and learning about culture. However, they do not describe any specific types of education and training programs that address the issue of how such programs should foster higher level thinking and the development of students and managers. They do list some common ways of developing global leaders and highlight 10 global leadership paradoxes, but they leave the issue of providing such specific higher level training and education untreated.

In this article, there is a description of a cross-cultural program, the sequential cross-cultural learning program, that begins with cross-cultural bipolar dimensions, proceeds through a deeper understanding of culture by emphasizing cultural metaphors, and concludes by addressing cross-cultural paradoxes, which are at the center of Holt and Seki's framework. Because all or most readers of this journal are thoroughly versed in the literature of dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), I begin with definitions and descriptions of cultural metaphors and cross-cultural paradoxes, followed by a description of a specific cross-cultural program, the sequential cross-cultural learning program.

Cultural Metaphors and Cross-Cultural Paradoxes

Work on cross-cultural metaphors began in 1987 when I was the John F. Kennedy Professor of Management at Thammasat University, Bangkok. I prepared for this appointment by studying the history, geography, religion, and culture of Thailand, its current events, and its language. As part of this preparation, I read thoroughly the first edition of Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* (1980). Although I found the book to be very persuasive, almost immediately upon arrival in Thailand I noticed values and behaviors different from the manner in which his four scales profiled Thailand vis-à-vis other nations. For example, Hofstede's dimensional study involving 49 nations and four territories considered as nations classified Thailand as a collectivistic culture, but I also noticed that Thais tend to be highly individualistic in many situations. Thus, it seemed to me that the Hofstede approach needed to be supplemented by a deeper way of thinking about culture.

I decided to teach a graduate-level business seminar at the University of Maryland emphasizing such deeper thinking that built upon the concept of a cultural metaphor, which is any activity, phenomenon, or institution that members of a given culture consider important and with which they identify emotionally or cognitively. Frequently, outsiders have difficulty either identifying a cultural metaphor or understanding it. For example, the Swedish *stuga* is a simple, unadorned weekend and vacation home that is found throughout the countryside in this nation. It represents such deep Swedish values as the love of untrammeled nature and tradition, individualism through self-development, and an emphasis on equality. This emphasis on equality even involves fines levied by courts of law, as they are based on the total assets and income of the offender rather than being uniform for the same offense.

The class members wanted to write a book in which each chapter would provide an introductory, first-best-guess but deeper reflection on culture than that provided by Hofstede and other dimensionalists. The major subheadings of each chapter (three to eight) would be the distinctive or unique features of the cultural metaphor that would guide the description and analysis. We did not regard Hofstede's work as antithetical to ours because ours overlapped with his, and we frequently used his dimensions at the end of each chapter as a way of summarizing some but not all key points. From our perspective, some features or dimensions of culture are distinctive of, or unique to, only one

nation or a small group of nations, while others follow the universal pattern that Hofstede had effectively described. After the initial publication of the book (Gannon and Associates, 1994), we were able to confirm this proposition in a six-nation study (Gannon, Gupta, Audia, & Kristof-Brown, 2005/2006).

In this way, we provided students and trainees with an anchor or cultural metaphor for each nation that they could easily remember and whose features they could use to think about what they were experiencing. To date, we have developed cultural metaphors for 31 nations and have even extended this way of thinking to clusters of nations, two continents, and diversity within one nation (India's dance of Shiva for traditional India and Kalaidoscopic India for modern, diverse India). Examples of cultural metaphors include American football, the Nigerian marketplace, the Italian opera, the sub-Saharan bush taxi, the Japanese garden, the Canadian backpack and flag, and the Danish Christmas luncheon.

Yet, there is the issue of stereotyping when using cultural metaphors, as they overlap, but humans think in terms of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Adler with Gunderson (2007) argue persuasively that it is legitimate and helpful to use stereotypes if they are descriptive rather than evaluative, the first best guess, based on data and observation, and subject to change when new information warrants it. I believe that cultural metaphors meet these requirements.

To reinforce the concepts of cultural metaphors, we have developed a large variety of training and educational methods that are beyond the scope of this article. The interested readers are referred to Gannon (2001, 2011), Gannon and Pillai (2012), and Altman et al. (2012).

However, all or most who have worked in the cross-cultural field know that at least some students and managers frequently respond to training and educational programs in this area with a jaundiced view. Although they may accept some of the

ideas, their responses sometimes take the form of ''That's helpful, but my experiences do not coincide with what you are presenting; I accept the ideas but know that, in practice, things are different'' and so on. Because of such reactions, I wanted to go to a deeper level of understanding with which students and managers could easily identify, namely cross-cultural paradoxes (Gannon, 2008).

After reviewing many definitions, I define a paradox as follows: It is a statement, or set of related statements, containing interrelated elements opposed to one another or in tension with one another or inconsistent with one another or contradictory to one another (i.e., either/or), thus seemingly rendering the paradox untrue when in fact it is true (both/and). For reviews of the literature on paradox, see Smith and Lewis (2011), Smith and Berg (1997), Quinn and Cameron (1988), and Gannon (2008). The key elements of a paradox are that it:

- is a reality that can be expressed in a statement or set of statements;
- contains interrelated contradictory or inconsistent elements that are in tension with one another;
- leads to the creation of a reality, and any statement or set of statements about this reality or paradox that is seemingly untrue due to the ''vicious'' circle generated by the contradictory or inconsistent elements is in fact true; and
- is framed or conceptualized as an either-or choice that is better framed as a both-and choice.

After a thorough review of the literature, I developed 93 cross-cultural paradoxes in such areas as leadership, motivation, and group behavior; language; symbolism; information technology; ethics; expatriate paradoxes; negotiating metaphors; multiethnicity; religion; geography; immigration; economic development and cultural change; economic risk, uncertainty, and political and economic issues

surrounding globalization; and business strategy, business functions, and international human resource management (Gannon, 2008).

Ben Schneider, who reviewed the book before publication, suggested that each of the 93 paradoxes be framed as questions so as to engage the student or manager quickly and to create an atmosphere of self-learning. For example, how can knowing the language of the host culture be a disadvantage? The paradox is that knowing the language is both an advantage and a disadvantage because such knowledge suggests to the host culture that you also know its norms and values. As such, the fluent individual is held to a higher standard than the nonfluent. I also developed some case studies and incidents throughout the book to reinforce the complexity of culture and to demonstrate why cultural metaphors and paradoxes are a more advanced form of thinking about cross-cultural similarities and differences than bipolar dimensions.

To return to Hofstede's five dimensions, I now feel that they in some ways represent cross-cultural paradoxes. For example, many of Hofstede's critics emphasize that a collectivistic nation can at some times be an individualistic nation, and vice versa, depending upon the situation. This is also true for individuals within collectivistic and individualistic nations. Kluckholn and Strodtbeck (1961) make a similar point, namely that a culture can have a dominant orientation but also a strong secondary orientation. Hence, I believe more strongly than in 1987 that it is very useful to begin with Hofstede and his well-known dimensions, emphasizing both strengths and weaknesses, but then go beyond them through the use of cultural metaphors and cross-cultural paradoxes for related but deeper levels of comprehension. Dimensions, cultural metaphors, and paradoxes have both strengths and limitations, and it is useful to discuss them without assuming that one approach is superior to the other (Gannon and Deb, in progress).

At the end of the training or learning process, it is then possible to link cross-cultural paradoxes to the dimensional perspective to provide a sense of closure. It is also possible to discuss cultural metaphors and dimensions within the context of the GLOBE's study's measures of values and practices on dimensions and its limited number of broad bands for nations or national societies rather than rank ordering nations on each dimension, as occurred in the Hofstede study. In this way, the student or trainee is able to see that learning about culture is gradual, but a sequential approach such as advocated in this article is not only possible but appropriate.

Osland and Osland's research supports this contention (2005/2006), as expatriate managers begin with a general stereotype of culture or cultural metaphor of the host culture. The more effective managers adjust this generalized stereotype as experience accumulates and begin to see it in terms of paradoxes. In fact, as managers move away from generalized stereotypes and see the host culture in terms of paradoxes, they are more effective. Such a perspective supports a sequential learning process that allows for the inclusion of related approaches outlined in Holt and Seki's Table 3. Hence and in summary, when managers complete an instrument involving the 10 global leadership paradoxes central to the Holt and Seki's framework, they will have a very good idea why dimensions, cultural metaphors, and cross-cultural paradoxes are not only important but necessary for understanding a culture, its many and varied manifestations, and the 10 leadership paradoxes that Holt and Seki so effectively profile.

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